



# **“For My Women I See Nothing”: Native American Women and the Dawes Act of 1887**

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“For My Women I See Nothing”:  
Native American Women and The Dawes Act of 1887

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A Thesis in the Field of History  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

When the United States government passed the Dawes Act on February 8, 1887, they saw it as a revolution. The Dawes Act and all associated policies, such as allotment, would only be in place until 1934—when it was reversed by the Wheeler-Howard Act (sometimes referred to as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934)—but its effects were far reaching. The Dawes Act deeply affected the gender roles of Native Americans within their societies, particularly the roles and lives of Native American women.

The Dawes Act shifted land ownership into the hands of men and, along with it, much of the control that had for centuries previously belonged to women. Historically, women in many Native American societies worked the land and thus controlled the source of food production. With the Dawes Act, much of that influence disappeared. The Dawes Act also forced a European family structure on the Native Americans; it allotted land only to male heads of household, which drastically altered the family structure in many Native groups that were historically matrilineal. Finally, the Dawes Act's focus on privatization of land would change Native ties to each other and the land; Native Americans would now work their land independently, far away from family and support systems. Throughout this thesis, these themes will be illustrated through the voices of a Piute woman, Sarah Winnemucca; a Hidasta woman, Buffalo Bird Woman; and a Sioux woman, Zitkala-Sa.

Many of these changes were not accidental; the explicit purpose of the Dawes Act was to assimilate Native Americans. Part of this assimilation process was the intentional

breaking down of Native peoples' cultures and traditions, essentially ethnocide. In the words of one Dawes rolls worker, Philip Lewis, who worked with the Creek nation, "In 1897 President Wm. McKinley appointed Tams Bixby as Commissioner to the Five Civilized Tribes. It was his duty with the commission to make a treaty with the Indians for the purpose of abolishing tribal governments, establishing their citizenship and arranging for the allotment of lands." Before even mentioning allotment as a goal of the commissioner, Lewis first names the elimination of the tribal governments of Native Americans.

### Author's Biographical Sketch

Rebecca C. Ball-Schaller graduated from Penn State in 2012 and currently teaches secondary Social Studies in rural Pennsylvania. The roots of this thesis are based on her time student teaching in an off-reservation boarding school in Pierre, South Dakota.

## Dedication

Quite simply to James, who was there every step of the way.

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## Introduction

“For the Sole Use and Benefit of the Indian”<sup>1</sup>

When the United States Government passed the Dawes Act (named after its main architect, Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts) into law on February 8, 1887,<sup>2</sup> they saw it as a modernization of United States government policy towards Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> The government considered the Dawes Act an answer to the “Indian Problem,” while reformers in societies like the “Friends of the Indian” thought it was a way to “secure justice for the tribes.”<sup>4</sup> While much of the wording of the Dawes Act was focused on Native American men, the legislation would have profound effects on Native American women. The policy of the Dawes Act disrupted the family structure and roles of women within historically matrilineal societies such as the Apache and Ojibwe peoples.

The Dawes Act forever changed many Native American cultures by abruptly shifting the focus to a male head of household. In many tribes, land and the power that went with it had historically been the domain of women. Under the Dawes Act, both

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<sup>1</sup> An Act to Provide for the Allotment of Lands in Severalty to Indians on the Various Reservations (General Allotment Act or Dawes Act), *Statutes at Large* 24: 388-91, NADP Document A1887 § 5 (1887) (amended 1891, 1898, 1906).

<sup>2</sup> D’Arcy McNickle, “Indian and European: Indian-White Relations from Discovery to 1887,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 311 (May 1957): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Paul Prucha, “American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (January 1984): 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan E. Burt, “‘Sioux Yells’ in the Dawes Era: Lakota ‘Indian Play,’ the Wild West, and the Literatures of Luther Standing Bear,” *American Quarterly* 62 no. 3 (2010): 642.

suddenly fell into the hands of men. In addition to this change, Native American women underwent changes to their family structure as privatization isolated and separated them from extended kin.

Countless Native women have experienced these effects of the Dawes Act, but scholars have largely understudied these women. This thesis will focus on three voices in particular: Sarah Winnemucca, Buffalo Bird Woman, and Zitkala-Sa. Though each is from a different tribe, their experiences are remarkably similar and illustrate the struggles many Native women went through.

### Background on the Dawes Act

Seen simply, the Dawes Act gave, or allotted, each Native American family one hundred sixty acres to farm. (More specifically, it allotted one hundred sixty acres to a family, eighty acres to a single person over the age of eighteen, and only forty acres to a single person under eighteen.<sup>5</sup>) The Dawes Act would not affect every Native American group. By 1887, European disease, warfare, and other consequences of westward expansion had nearly or entirely killed off many Native American groups. Other tribes had already agreed to treaties that included individual allotments over the previous decades. Finally, certain tribes, primarily in the American Southwest, would never have allotment policies. Thus, the Dawes Act principally affected Native Americans in the American Northwest, from the Pacific Northwest to the Plains.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Benedict J. Colombi, "Damned in Region Six: The Nez Perce Tribe, Agricultural Development, and the Inequality of Scale," *American Indian Quarterly* 29 no. 3/4 (2005): 568.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard A. Carlson, "Federal Policy and Indian Land: Economic Interests and the Sale of Indian Allotments, 1900-1934," *Agricultural History* 57, no. 1 (January 1983): 35.

The objective of the Dawes Act was to turn Native Americans into idealized Jeffersonian yeoman farmers (the *European* ideal). However, many of the affected Native American groups had never been farmers, and their land was unsuitable for crops. One hundred sixty acres was not enough to support a family in such climates, so the result was widespread poverty and hardship.<sup>7</sup> The Dawes Act followed the growing trend in the mid-1880s of allotments.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it was the culmination of this mindset.<sup>9</sup> The Act was signed by President Grover Cleveland on February 8, 1887.<sup>10</sup> In 1890, the commissioner of Indian affairs professed numerous times that the Dawes Act indicated the “beginning of a new era.”<sup>11</sup> It was surely a new era, but not the era of progress it was proclaimed to be.

For the agents of assimilation, the Dawes Act was necessary reform. Native Americans, however, viewed it in quite a different light. For them, it was, in the words of historian Alexandra Witkin, “repressive emancipation ... the attempt to liberate a people from conditions they themselves do not consider oppressive.”<sup>12</sup> Europeans projected their own history onto Native Americans: as European peasants needed to be emancipated from the lord of the manor, Europeans felt, so did the Natives from their “savage”

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” *Agriculture History* 50, no. 1 (January 1976): 18.

<sup>8</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

<sup>9</sup> Prucha, “American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century,” 15.

<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Witkin, “To Silence a Drum: The Imposition of United States Citizenship on Native Peoples,” *Historical Reflections* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 376.

<sup>11</sup> Prucha, “American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century,” 8.

<sup>12</sup> Witkin, “To Silence a Drum,” 355.

lifestyle. Native Americans felt no need for such emancipation.<sup>13</sup> They did not see their own lifestyle as inferior to the white population's, so they saw no need to change.

The Dawes Act marked a shift in legislation dealing with what was called the "Indian problem." The "problem" was that the United States government didn't know what to do with an entire ethnic group comprising people it had already forced off their lands and divested of their occupations. After years of forced relocation and war, the government needed a more lasting solution.

The Dawes Act was a continuation of relocation policy, but with the added goal of assimilating Native Americans.<sup>14</sup> Assimilation of Native Americans, in fact, was the main driving force behind the Dawes Act: in the words of Senator Dawes, "the Indian who has left his tribe, turned his back upon the savage life, has adopted the mode and habits of civilized life, is in all respects like one of us."<sup>15</sup> Though this may have been the hope of Senator Dawes, it was not the feeling of many white Americans, who viewed Natives who adopted a European lifestyle as better than other Natives but still second-class citizens. By forcing individual Native Americans to become more like white European settlers, the agents of assimilation hoped that Native American cultures would break down. Their goal was essentially ethnocide.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Witkin, "To Silence a Drum," 355.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Carter, Edward Chappell, and Timothy McCleary, "In the Lodge of the Chickadee: Architecture and Cultural Resistance on the Crow Indian Reservation, 1884-1920," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 10 (2005): 100.

<sup>15</sup> Witkin, "To Silence a Drum," 375-376.

<sup>16</sup> Witkin, "To Silence a Drum," 362. This idea can also be seen in the quote from Paul Lewis in the Abstract. Philip A. Lewis, "Indian-Pioneer History," interview by Jas. S. Buchanan, *Indian Pioneer History Collection*, ed. Grant Foreman (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2007), 61: 275.

Native Americans had no choice whether to participate in the Dawes Act, despite the fact that in 1887 they were not yet American citizens—and would not be until 1924.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, all allotted land first entered a twenty-five-year trust with the government, giving the Natives little control over their own land.<sup>18</sup> Section Five of the Dawes Act states, “The United States does and will hold the land thus allotted, for the period of twenty-five years, in trust for the sole use and benefit of the Indian to whom such allotment shall have been made, or, in case of his decease, of his heirs according to the laws of the State or Territory where such land is located, and that at the expiration of said period the United States will convey the same by patent to said Indian, or his heirs.”<sup>19</sup> If individual Native Americans did not choose their land within a fixed time, the government chose their allotment for them:<sup>20</sup> “That if any one entitled to an allotment shall fail to make a selection within four years ... the Secretary of the Interior may direct the agent of such tribe or band ... to make a selection for such Indian.”<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, Native Americans would have no say at all in the allotment process. In 1902, the Supreme Court ruled in *Hitchcock v. Lone Wolf* that Native Americans “did not have to consent to allotment.”<sup>22</sup> This gave the United States government authority over all Native American civilizations; the government could now sell all additional land

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<sup>17</sup> Carlson, “Federal Policy and Indian Land,” 34.

<sup>18</sup> Fred S. McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights: Indian Lands, Ethnic Externalities, and Bureaucratic Budgets,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 1990): 301.

<sup>19</sup> Dawes Act § 5 (1887).

<sup>20</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 302.

<sup>21</sup> Dawes Act § 2 (1887).

<sup>22</sup> John D. Barton and Candace M. Barton, “Jurisdiction of Ute Reservation Lands,” *American Indian Law Review* 26, no. 1 (2001/2002): 140.

without the permission of the Native Americans. “With the Lone Wolf decision, the last obstacle to breaking up reservations was removed.”<sup>23</sup> Now, even if Native American groups did not wish to sell off excess land on their reservations, it would not matter; the government could. Furthermore, all tribes were now subject to allotment, whether or not they agreed to it.

Originally, legislators thought the allotment process would be lengthy and time consuming. However, once Native land was available for purchase by white settlers, the process moved rather quickly—so quickly, in fact, that even Senator Dawes expressed his consternation that the speed with which land was allotted was due to “the greed and hunger and thirst of the white man for the Indian’s land.”<sup>24</sup> The amount of land that passed from Native to white hands during this time period is staggering. Once land passed into the hands of white settlers, Natives would not receive that land back.

The Dawes Act was similar in idea to the Homestead Act of 1862,<sup>25</sup> but unlike the Homestead Act, those the Dawes Act affected had no say in its creation and, often, no say even in which plot of land was given to them.<sup>26</sup> The Dawes Act allowed the President of the United States to split and allocate Native land at his will and pleasure and sell off what he deemed “excess” to their requirements.<sup>27</sup> Under the Dawes Act, the government

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<sup>23</sup> Barton and Barton, “Jurisdiction of Ute Reservation Lands,” 140.

<sup>24</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 303.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” *Journal of the Southwest* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 566.

<sup>26</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 302.

<sup>27</sup> McNickle, “Indian and European,” 10.

sold any unallotted, Native American-owned land to white settlers.<sup>28</sup> This policy led to Native Americans losing large tracts of land during this time period.

In 1887, Native Americans owned 155,632,612 acres. By the turn of the twentieth century, that number fell by almost half, to just 77,865,373 acres.<sup>29</sup> A large portion of this loss was due to the allotment process. (The United States even forced Natives to pay for the surveying necessary for allotment.)<sup>30</sup> A total of 17,400,000 acres of “surplus” land—one-seventh of all remaining Native American-owned land in the United States—was sold in just one year during this time period, 1891, by the Indian Commission.<sup>31</sup> The Indian Commission placed the money from this sale in a trust for tribal use; the U.S. Treasury held the trust.<sup>32</sup> The land was usually sold at the rate of \$2.50 an acre.<sup>33</sup> Some individual societies lost even greater proportions of land. Because of allotment, the Nez Perce lost 524,064 acres of land, or almost seventy-three percent of their total lands, for just over three dollars an acre.<sup>34</sup>

Though allotment itself moved rapidly, Native Americans did not take up farming with equal speed. For instance, almost a decade into the allotment process, less than one-fifth of Cheyenne-Arapaho men were “actually occupying and cultivating their own

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<sup>28</sup> Donald J. Berthrong, “Legacies of the Dawes Act: Bureaucrats and Land Thieves at the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agencies of Oklahoma,” *Arizona and the West* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 336.

<sup>29</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 303.

<sup>30</sup> McNickle, “Indian and European,” 10.

<sup>31</sup> Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” 567.

<sup>32</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 303.

<sup>33</sup> McNickle, “Indian and European,” 10.

<sup>34</sup> Colombi, “Damned in Region Six,” 568-569.



lands.”<sup>35</sup> As it became apparent that many Native Americans were not taking up agriculture on their allotments, Congress allowed for the leasing of allotments only four years after the passing of the Dawes Act.<sup>36</sup> Many Natives exercised that option, finding it more profitable.<sup>37</sup> Soon, more allotments were being leased and worked by other people than were actually being worked by their owners.<sup>38</sup>

Simply assigning Native Americans allotments did not mean that they would assimilate and become farmers. In fact, in the years following the Dawes Act the rate of Native American farming decreased.<sup>39</sup> This trend would continue throughout the years that the Dawes Act was in place. In 1910, 74.7% of Native Americans were actively working as farmers. Twenty years later in 1930, only a few years before the Wheeler-Howard Act would put an end to the allotment system, that portion of Native farmers had fallen to 64.5%.<sup>40</sup>

The assimilation activist’s vision of individual Native American farmers never came to fruition because of a few factors. Many of the allotments were simply too small to sustain a family in the first place.<sup>41</sup> Over generations, allotments were split among

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<sup>35</sup> Berthrong, “Legacies of the Dawes Act,” 338.

<sup>36</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 304.

<sup>37</sup> Berthrong, “Legacies of the Dawes Act,” 338.

<sup>38</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 304.

<sup>39</sup> Valerie Sherer Mathas, “Nineteenth Century Women and Reform: The Women's National Indian Association,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 12.

<sup>40</sup> Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” 567.

<sup>41</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 18.

heirs, leading to even smaller plots of land.<sup>42</sup> After a few generations the allotments became so small that the idea of being able to support a family on such a small plot of land became “ludicrous.”<sup>43</sup> With the beginning of allotment, the federal government sent out instructors to teach the Native Americans how to be successful agriculturalists, but in many cases the instructors were undertrained.<sup>44</sup> Native Americans were aware of this, as the Chippewa leader Shaynowishkung told the commission early on:

Are you going to anchor us there without any subsistence? ... There are a lot of Indians who know how to pursue the white man's work, but how shall we subsist when you have anchored us there? I have been a farm hand for ten years. I know the minutia of advancing a farm, although I have not the means of advancing a farm myself. How shall we manage to get ahead so that we can become self-supporting? We will be very much obliged to you if you will please state to us what we may expect when we get there, and what our progress will be.<sup>45</sup>

Shaynowishkung's words fell on deaf ears,<sup>46</sup> and tales like his abound: plots of land that were too small, away from water sources, without resources, etc. Undertrained farmers on small plots often found it difficult to secure a line of credit if needed.<sup>47</sup> Even successful agriculturalists, such as a Cherokee man known as D.W.C., could not sustain a living:

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Stuart, “United States Indian Policy: From the Dawes Act to the American Indian Policy Review Commission,” *Social Service Review* 51, no. 3 (September 1977): 453.

<sup>43</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 304.

<sup>44</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 15.

<sup>45</sup> Shaynowishkung, “You See That I Am Now Nothing but a Corpse,” in *Ojibway Oratory: Great Moments in the Recorded Speech of the Chippewa, 1695-1889*, ed. Mark Diedrich (Rochester, MN: Coyote Books, 1990), 106.

<sup>46</sup> Shaynowishkung, “You See,” 106.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart, “United States Indian Policy,” 453.

D.W.C. had previously been farming 300 acres fruitfully, but due to allotment he now had only 60 acres.<sup>48</sup>

Not only were the plots of land given to Native Americans too small for sustainability, but the land most suitable for growing crops was not part of the allotments. That land, along with former hunting grounds, was usually taken by white settlers.<sup>49</sup> Tracts of land containing water, along with land needed to get to water sources, also usually fell into the hands of white settlers.<sup>50</sup> In dryer climates, this made it impossible for Natives to support any type of agriculture. By 1927, “70 percent of the irrigated land was owned by whites.”<sup>51</sup> Even before the passage of the Dawes Act, many knew that the land Native Americans would receive was less than desirable. A. D. Banesteel, an Indian Agent, in 1858 wrote from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, that “the country given to [the Indians] is cold, by no means fitted for farming purposes and altogether inferior to the land conveyed by the Indians to the United States.”<sup>52</sup> (Despite these musings, Banesteel felt that allotment was the best solution and that five-acre plots should be sufficient for Native Americans.)<sup>53</sup>

The undesirable, small plots became even smaller as the plots were passed from one generation to another. Quickly, “fractionation” became a problem: many family

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<sup>48</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 18.

<sup>49</sup> Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” 567.

<sup>50</sup> Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” 567.

<sup>51</sup> Henry E. Fritz, “An American Dilemma: Administration of the Indian Estate under the Dawes Act and Amendments the Dispossession of the American Indian,” *Journal of the Southwest* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 124.

<sup>52</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

<sup>53</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

members and co-owners would share small pieces of an already small plot of land. (Some owned several scattered small pieces, inherited from various family members). Due to their size, these plots had no valuable economic or agricultural use. The red tape and federal policy surrounding the allotments compounded this problem over the years.<sup>54</sup>

Some failures of the Dawes Act were beyond anyone's control. The first winter of the Dawes Act was the fiercest that much of the Midwest had seen in years. In the Dakota Territory in the winter of 1886–87, the temperature did not get above zero degrees Fahrenheit for fifty-six days. As the first Natives went to the Great Sioux Reservation, they faced a desolate and ravaged landscape that would not quickly recover.<sup>55</sup>

After years of being unsuccessful in producing from their land, many Native Americans chose instead to sell their allotments.<sup>56</sup> Others lost their allotments or were forced to sell them because the allotments were so unsuccessful that they had accumulated back taxes and other debts.<sup>57</sup> Many Native Americans were unfamiliar with tax laws and ended up losing their allotments due to back taxes they didn't know they owed.<sup>58</sup> Things did not go any better for Native Americans who refused to actively work

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<sup>54</sup> Kristina L. McCulley, "The American Indian Probate Reform Act of 2004: The Death of Fractionation or Individual Native American Property Interests and Tribal Customs?" *American Indian Law Review* 30 no. 2 (2005/2006): 408.

<sup>55</sup> Nathan B. Sanderson, "'We Were all Trespassers': George Edward Lemmon, Anglo-American Cattle Ranching, and the Great Sioux Reservation," *Agricultural History* 85, no. 1 (2011): 66.

<sup>56</sup> Carlson, "Federal Policy and Indian Land," 34- 35.

<sup>57</sup> Stuart, "United States Indian Policy."

<sup>58</sup> Wessel, "Agriculture, Indians and American History," 19.

on their allotments. In such cases, the United States directed its agents to “withhold rations and annuities provided for in the Act.”<sup>59</sup>

In 1906, Congress revised the Dawes Act with the Burke Act, which essentially allowed the twenty-five-year trust period to be shortened. To shorten their trusts, Native Americans had to meet certain regulations, which were all tied closely with how assimilated the individual Native American had become; for instance, they had to have attended school. Furthermore, the Burke Act required proof that the individual Native was “competent and capable of managing his or her affairs.”<sup>60</sup> This vague wording was open to interpretation by the agents of assimilation. After the passing of the Burke Act, another wave of Native American land passed into the hands of white settlers.<sup>61</sup>

By the time the Wheeler-Howard Act was passed in 1934, nearly half of Native lands had passed from Native ownership.<sup>62</sup> The hope that Native Americans would become independent farmers never came to fruition due to a variety of factors, including that many of the allotments Natives were given were of poor quality—lacking a water supply, etc.<sup>63</sup>—and not large enough to sustain a family. Modern historians have called the Dawes Act everything from a “disaster”<sup>64</sup> for Native American peoples to just another

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<sup>59</sup> Suzianne D. Painter-Thorne, “One Step Forward, Two Giant Steps Back: How the “Existing Indian Family” Exception (RE) Imposes Anglo American Legal Values on American Indian Tribes to the Detriment of Cultural Autonomy,” *American Indian Law Review* 33 no. 2 (2008-2009): 349.

<sup>60</sup> An Act to Amend Section Six of an Act Approved February Eighth, Eighteen Hundred and Eighty-Seven (Burke Act), *Statutes at Large* 34, 182-83, NADP Document A1906 (1906).

<sup>61</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 305.

<sup>62</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 303.

<sup>63</sup> Nabhan, “The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” 567.

<sup>64</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 307.

link in the chain of “long abuse of the Indian race”:<sup>65</sup> another broken promise or sleight of hand used by the United States government to force more Native Americans out of their lands. Historians today agree that the Dawes Act was essentially a failure in all respects.<sup>66</sup> There seems to be no evidence that the Dawes Act was successful in its stated goals, or indeed that it produced *any* positive effects for Native Americans, intended or not.

### Brief History of Native American Women

From 1887 to the modern day (and indeed the history extends much further back), Europeans and European Americans tend to view Native Americans as one large group with a single homogeneous culture, language, religion, etc. This is far from the truth. The numbers vary widely, and more than likely we will never know the truth, but by some estimates at the time of European arrival there were over two hundred different Native American languages.<sup>67</sup> (These numbers often look at “European arrival” as the encounters post-1492 CE, when Native numbers had already been reduced by the earlier arrival of the Vikings, and their diseases, in the eleventh century.) The general American public today knows very little about Native American women. In fact, outside of the stories of Pocahontas and Sacagawea (stories which share the commonality of a young Native woman saving/helping white men and then virtually disappearing in history),<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 308.

<sup>66</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 307.

<sup>67</sup> Annette Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 1.

<sup>68</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 2.

many Americans—even many historians—would be hard pressed to come up with any information about Native American women or even to name one.

### The Study

As any study will, this thesis has its limitations. Those directly impacted at the time of the Dawes Act are long deceased and cannot be interviewed. The field of Native American research has its own limitations as well, due to years of ethnocide, and Native American women can be particularly difficult to study since European writers have largely ignored them throughout much of the last five hundred years of history. Early settlers in many cases saw what they wanted to see, alleging that Native American women were “dominated by men;” later, white anthropologists “simply assumed the division of labor to be the same as in Europe and did not research the issue carefully.”<sup>69</sup> Both later anthropologists and early settlers believed or assumed that Native Americans’ social structure was identical to their own.

This study uses various sources. Primary sources from the time period are emphasized. Included in these primary sources are letters from Indian Agents, speeches from Native leaders such as Sitting Bull, and legal documents such as the Dawes Act and Burke Act. These sources are interwoven to try and tell as complete a narrative as possible. The sources surrounding the lives of three Native women (discussed in the next paragraph) are central and unique primary sources. These primary sources are supplemented by more recent, secondary sources drawn from the scholarship done on Native women, Native American studies, and ethnohistory.

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<sup>69</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 4.

This thesis focuses on three Native women, but they are not the only Native women who will appear. These three women were chosen because of their shared experiences as a result of the Dawes Act and because of their own individual experiences. They were also chosen because they are rich and full-length narratives told by Native American women, something that is tremendously rare.

Zitkala-Sa, sometimes called Red Bird or Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, was from the Sioux tribe. She went to boarding schools in her childhood, continued her education through college, and would later become a teacher herself at Native boarding schools.<sup>70</sup> Buffalo Bird Women's autobiographies (as told to Gilbert L. Wilson, an invaluable ethnographer to Native historians today) recount much of Hidatsa tradition, customs, and beliefs. They include plentiful descriptions of Native women's experiences in agriculture, which were greatly affected by the Dawes Act.<sup>71</sup> Finally, Sarah Winnemucca is remarkable because of the role of leadership she took up within her community on the reservation. Sarah's father was a Piute leader, and Sarah worked as an interpreter and often negotiator between various tribes, U.S. government officials, and Indian agents on the reservation. Her book *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, published in 1883, gave an eye-opening account of the many abuses her people had suffered since their first encounter with the white settlers.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Karen L. Kilcup, ed., *Native American Women's Writings 1800-1924: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 294.

<sup>71</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 110.

<sup>72</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 129.



## Chapter 1

“The Young Men Should Be Off Hunting....”<sup>73</sup>

Historically, owning or working the land is a source of one type of power, because land produces the food needed for any culture to survive. This was the case even in Native American civilizations that viewed ownership of land differently than Europeans. (Many Native American civilizations did not believe in private land ownership, but rather in collective land ownership or stewardship.) Before the Dawes Act and similar land allotment policies, women controlled the land throughout many Native American societies. In many cases, the idea of men extensively participating in agriculture was unheard of before the passage of the Dawes Act.

When asked about this, Buffalo Bird Women laughed at the idea: “Did young men work in the fields? (laughing heartily.) Certainly not! The young men should be off hunting, or on a war party; and youths not yet young men should be out guarding the horses. Their duties were elsewhere, also they spent a great deal of time dressing up to be seen of the village maidens; they should not be working in the fields!”<sup>74</sup> Buffalo Bird Women and other members of her community knew their respective roles: women worked in the fields, while men were hunters and warriors. The idea of anything else struck her as simply absurd. Since women worked the fields and therefore managed the

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<sup>73</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians: An Indian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1917), 116.

<sup>74</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 116.

stable food production, they held extensive influence within their tribes. The Dawes Act, however, suddenly allotted land to the *male* heads of household.

According to the European model, men were the heads of household. (By contrast, many—though not all—Native American cultures were in some respect matrilineal.) With the Dawes Act, the United States government tried to force the European model on Native Americans, to assimilate them through a gendered form of agriculture. European men were supposed to work the fields, while women were confined to the household. When Native Americans adopted this model, the roles of women changed, and the source of their authority diminished.

### 1.1 Assimilation through Agriculture

Since Europeans first began to settle in the Americas, they have attempted to forcibly assimilate Native Americans. One of the earliest vehicles used for assimilation was the spreading of European faiths. In the 1800s, though Christian missionaries were still plentiful,<sup>75</sup> the method of assimilation would become more economic through the process of allotment. In fact, religious and economic methods of assimilation often went hand in hand; Senator Dawes was described as “a humane Christian gentleman.”<sup>76</sup>

The Dawes Act continued the process of forced assimilation through agriculture, Native schools, and mission groups.<sup>77</sup> While government agents taught adult Native Americans to farm, they sent their children away to schools to educate them in the ways

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<sup>75</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 302.

<sup>76</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 302-303.

<sup>77</sup> Jane E. Simonsen, “‘Object Lessons’: Domesticity and Display in Native American Assimilation,” *American Studies* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 80.

of white settlers.<sup>78</sup> Many early European settlers were fixed in their mindset that people who based their civilization on hunting were “savages.” One objective of the Dawes Act was to turn hunters into farmers.<sup>79</sup> Teaching Native men to become farmers was believed to be the fastest route to “civilizing” Native Americans.<sup>80</sup>

Forced assimilation was not a new practice; it existed from the earliest days of the United States’ history and appears in the historical records of the Creek and the Six Nations dating back to the 1700s.<sup>81</sup> Even this early, there was resistance to allotment and assimilation. One reverend, Samuel Checote, who was preaching in the Creek territories, remembers that “it was no easy job to enroll the Creeks for some were bitterly against it ... they would walk up to some Indian home, and they would find the Indians had slipped away. They had to ask the children to find out where the parents had gone ... some were instructed by the parents not to tell where they had gone. Some of these Creeks refused flatly to enroll, they did not want the white man's government.”<sup>82</sup>

Just as forced assimilation predated the Dawes Act, so too did the policy of allotment. In fact, by the mid-19th century, government allotment of Native American lands had begun with a fervor.<sup>83</sup> Its supporters saw allotment as the answer to two problems: what to do with the many displaced Native Americans and how to “civilize”

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<sup>78</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 8.

<sup>79</sup> McCulley, “The American Indian Probate Reform Act of 2004,” 404.

<sup>80</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

<sup>81</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 15.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Checote, “Muskogee or Creek Tradition,” Interview by Jefferson Berryhill, *Indian Pioneer History Collection*, ed. Grant Foreman (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2007), 19: 433.

<sup>83</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

the Native population. Allotment, many government officials and white settlers felt, was the “great link in the chain of civilization.”<sup>84</sup> The government hoped that at the end of the allotment process the Natives would be economically self-sufficient.<sup>85</sup> No one seemed to notice or care that they already had been self-sufficient for many years before the arrival of Europeans.

The process of assimilation through agriculture dates at least as far back as the early nineteenth century. During that time period, treaties with Natives groups “frequently contained provisions for employment of government farmers to teach agricultural skills to the Indians.”<sup>86</sup> As the nineteenth century wore on, this pattern increased; for example, a treaty with the Kiowas people promised them capital to begin practicing agriculture.<sup>87</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, allotment had become policy and assimilation through agriculture the answer to the “Indian problem.” The purpose of the allotment process and the Dawes Act was assimilation.

## 1.2 Native American Agriculture

Many Native Americans were hesitant or unwilling to participate in the allotment process. This was for a variety of reasons. For one, many Native Americans already practiced agriculture, but their knowledge, background, and customs were ignored as they

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<sup>84</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

<sup>85</sup> McChesney, “Government as Definer of Property Rights,” 302.

<sup>86</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 15.

<sup>87</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 16.

were forced to do things the “white” way.<sup>88</sup> Agriculture was a long-standing part of many Native American societies, a fact that Europeans tended to ignore or forget. In fact, early European settlers were introduced to many European staples like tomatoes and potatoes thanks to Native American agriculture.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Native American agriculture saved many early European colonists (e.g., Jamestown, Plymouth) from starvation.<sup>90</sup>

It was from Native Americans that early European settlers learned what farming techniques worked best in their new environments.<sup>91</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, agriculture continued to be a main source of food for many Native Americans. For example, in the Nez Perce nation, women primarily worked with planted foods. The women practiced such techniques as slash and burn and limited what crops were harvested so younger plants had time to mature.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout early American history, Native American crops were often the target of warfare. Destroying crops left the soldiers without a food source, forcing the society to turn away from war to finding another food source.<sup>93</sup> George Washington once told his men to “march on the Iroquois and specifically noted the need to destroy their growing crops at a time when it was too late for replanting.”<sup>94</sup> This type of warfare was not

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<sup>88</sup> Carlson, “Federal Policy and Indian Land,” 35.

<sup>89</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 9.

<sup>90</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 9.

<sup>91</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 9.

<sup>92</sup> Colombi, “Damned in Region Six,” 565.

<sup>93</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 14.

<sup>94</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 14.

uncommon, but many European settlers did not make the connection that many Native Americans already practiced agriculture in some form.

Part of the reason Europeans had a hard time grasping Native American agriculture was that mass production was not its objective. Many Native societies produced food only at the level needed to survive, putting surplus aside for times of need (e.g., when a year's crops failed). Most did not produce acres upon acres of crops to sell them.<sup>95</sup> This was a cultural difference that Europeans either could not or would not understand.

### 1.3 Native American Women and Their Power as Agriculturalists

Women held much of the power in many Native societies, undeniably because they controlled the means of production. Food, and particularly corn, were sacred to many Native populations. Buffalo Bird Women described this relationship:

We cared for our corn in those days, as we would care for a child; for we Indian people loved our fields as mothers love their children. We thought that the corn plants had souls, as children have souls, and that the growing corn liked to hear us sing, as children like to hear their mothers sing to them. Nor did we want the birds to come and steal our corn, after the hard work of planting and hoeing. Horses, too, might break into the field, or boys might steal the green ears and go off and roast them.<sup>96</sup>

She goes on to tell that her grandmother scolded her as a child for dropping corn and told her that it would upset the gods: “Baby-like, I ran my fingers through the shiny

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<sup>95</sup> McNickle, “Indian and European,” 4.

<sup>96</sup> Gilbert L. Wilson, *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story, Told by Herself to Gilbert L. Wilson*, Ph.D. (St. Paul: Webb Publishing, 1921), 94.

grain, spilling a few kernels on the floor. ‘Do not do that,’ cried my grandmother. ‘Corn is sacred; if you waste it, the gods will be angry.’”<sup>97</sup>

In addition to corn, Buffalo Bird Woman also mentions that the Hidatsa held land in high regard; again, it held a religious quality for them. “We Indians thought our fields sacred, and we did not like to quarrel about them. A family's right to a field once having been set up, no one thought of disputing it. If anyone tried to seize land belonging to another, we thought some evil would come upon him; as that one of his family would die or have some bad sickness.”<sup>98</sup>

Women had a remarkable degree of control of their land, not only in life but in death as well. Buffalo Bird Women described what happened to the land women farmed in the case of their death:

“Sometimes a woman died and her garden was abandoned by her relatives, who perhaps had more land than they could use.... If a woman died and her relatives did not care to till her garden it was free to any one who cared to make use of it. However, if a woman desired to take possession of such an abandoned field, it was thought right that she should ask permission of the dead owner’s relatives. Permission might be asked of the dead woman’s son, or daughter, her mother, her husband’s sister, or of the husband himself.”<sup>99</sup>

Hidatsa women had stewardship of the land, and if matters of use were at issue in the event of a woman’s death, her family had a say; the land didn’t automatically go to her husband. Moreover, women often owned the home in Native cultures, which viewed it as their domain. Buffalo Bird Woman describes her home growing up as unequivocally

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<sup>97</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 36.

<sup>98</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 41

<sup>99</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 114.

belonging to her mother: “My mothers' earth lodge—for the lodge belonged to the women of a household—was a large one....”<sup>100</sup>

The connection women had with land and food provided them with authority in other aspects of their tribes. Among the Lakota people, an important mythical figure was White Buffalo Woman, who was responsible for, among other things, the peace pipe. Other female gods, such as Corn Mother, were central in Native faiths.<sup>101</sup> Historically, women such as Blue Robed Cloud, from the early nineteenth century, functioned in a religious capacity, acting as mediums or shamans. Such women were thought to speak with spirits and foretell impending events.<sup>102</sup>

Among the Navajo, women possessed herds and land.<sup>103</sup> Some Ojibwe women went on to be warriors, such as Hanging Cloud Woman, who took over in battle after the death of her father and then chased the enemy.<sup>104</sup> There is even evidence that women were chiefs in some tribes, and newer evidence suggests that this may have been much more common than previously thought.<sup>105</sup> In particular, historians know of at least three Ojibwe women who were chiefs in the late 1800s, including Ruth Flatmouth, the leader of the Pillagers.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 46.

<sup>101</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 6.

<sup>102</sup> Priscilla K. Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women,” *Minnesota History* 48, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 243.

<sup>103</sup> Jack D. Forbes, “The Native Intellectual Tradition in Relation to Race, Gender and Class,” *Race, Gender & Class* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 28.

<sup>104</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 244.

<sup>105</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 242.

<sup>106</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 242-243.



In the famous battle of Little Bighorn, the Oglala Lakota women escorted their warriors onto the battlefield. The soldiers unfamiliar with seeing women in such a role were horrified and partial in their view: “Hordes of squaws and old, gray-haired Indians were roaming over the battlefield howling like mad. The squaws had stone mallets and mashed in the skulls of the dead and wounded. Many were gashed with knives and some had their noses and other members cut off.”<sup>107</sup> These accounts, among many others, illustrate the diversity and complexity of women’s roles within their societies. Despite their differences, however, these women’s roles have one thing in common: they commanded respect. In that, they were all fundamentally different from the Eurocentric gender roles that the Dawes Act dictated for Native American women.<sup>108</sup>

Native American societies were diverse in their structures. In many, women played a vital role. The roles of many Native women varied greatly from the roles of European women in the eighteenth century. Widespread generalizations about Native American women should not be made; instead, Native American women must be seen in the context of their distinctly structured individual civilizations.<sup>109</sup> Trends can, however, be found that highlight the differences between the roles and consequent powers of Native American women and their European contemporaries.<sup>110</sup> One of those trends is that Native women tended to hold substantial authority; this is fairly consistent across many different Native societies.

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<sup>107</sup> Marla N. Powers, “New Perspectives on American Indian Women,” *Revue Française D’études Américaines*, no. 38 (1988): 352.

<sup>108</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 6.

<sup>109</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 3.

<sup>110</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 1-2.

The question remains, why did Europeans continue to see Native women as inferior, or as being treated as inferior, within their own societies? Some historians argue that Europeans simply projected their own familiar social structure onto the Native Americans. Others contend that Native women may have been portrayed this way deliberately, so it would be easier to force the European culture and family structure onto Native Americans.<sup>111</sup> In some cases, even when early Europeans became aware of the influence women held, they chose to ignore it or reject it.<sup>112</sup> Europeans were aware of the control women held within the Iroquois nation as early as the 1800s, but still viewed Iroquois women as “inferior to men.”<sup>113</sup> Writer and ethnographer Lewi Henry Morgan came to this conclusion after noting that the Iroquois women did most of the hard labor.

With the passage of the Dawes Act, women would lose their power and responsibility as Europeans dictated new gender roles for Native Americans. As women lost their traditional roles, they lost their authority and influential place in their tribes. In an incredible moment of foresight in 1881, Chief Sitting Bull predicted to ethnographer Alice Fletcher his fears for Native American women:

You are a woman. You have come to me as a friend. Take pity on my women, for they have no future. The young men can be like the white man, till the soil, supply the food and clothing; they will take the work out of the hands of the women, and the women, to whom we have owed everything in the past, will be stripped of all which gave them power and position among the people. Give a future to my women! They have worked for us. They are good; they are faithful; but in the new life their work is taken away. For my men I see a future; for my women I see nothing. Help them if you can.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 238.

<sup>112</sup> Rayna Green, “Native American Women,” *Signs* 6, no. 2 (1980): 250.

<sup>113</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 238.

<sup>114</sup> Sitting Bull, “For My Women I See Nothing,” *Sitting Bull: The Collected Speeches*, ed. Mark Diedrich (Rochester, MN: Coyote Books, 1998), 146.

## Chapter 2

“The Women Must Not Work in the Field Like the Men....

They Can Cook for Their Husbands....”<sup>115</sup>

Unlike European societies, many Native American societies were matrilineal. This meant that family divisions, as well as tribal lines and allegiances, were based on the female side of the family.<sup>116</sup> The Dawes Act, however, only recognized and allotted land to male heads of household. This drastically changed the family structure for many Native Americans, as the law required them to adopt a more European model. The United States designed the Dawes Act to break up the traditional family structure that was so foreign to Europeans.

### 2.1 European Notions and Myths about Native American Women

Despite widespread fascination with the history of American West, there is remarkably little record of the lives of Native women. The few European writings that did include Native women still viewed them through a European lens. European men expected women to be weak and fragile, so that is what they saw when they interacted with Native American women. Used to seeing and treating women as “inferior,” they saw

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<sup>115</sup> Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, ed. Mrs. Horace Mann (Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1883), 108.

<sup>116</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 4.

no reason a new group of women should be treated differently.<sup>117</sup> In more extreme cases, early settlers described Native Women as “beasts of burden” and “menial slaves.”<sup>118</sup>

Europeans tended to view Native Americans from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In the case of gender roles, this led to the assumption that Native men were the rulers and the center of authority and that women’s primary (or only) role was the home and hearth.<sup>119</sup> For many Native Americans, this was simply not the case. Europeans assumed Native American women held a similar role to European women—or that if they did not, they should. To European men, the roles and world of women were simply not significant. The roles of men, their jobs, clout, and authority, were all that was important, and usually all that they recorded.<sup>120</sup>

## 2.2 Change to European Gender Roles

One of the most destructive consequences of the Dawes Act was that, by inflicting European gender norms on Native Americans, it upset their gender roles and specifically the roles of women within Native American societies. These gender roles were deeply engrained in the culture and lifestyles of many Native Americans. Cephas Washburn, a missionary who observed a Cherokee wedding in 1819, described the ceremony as a mutual promise: “The groom and bride now commence stepping towards each other, and they meet in the middle of the council house, the groom presents his venison, and

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<sup>117</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 238

<sup>118</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 2.

<sup>119</sup> Nancy Shoemaker, “Native-American Women in History,” *OAH Magazine of History* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 12.

<sup>120</sup> Shoemaker, “Native-American Women in History,” 12.

the bride her corn, and the blankets are united. This ceremony put into words is a promise on the part of the man that he will provide meat for his family and on the woman's part that she will furnish bread, and on the part of both that they will occupy the same bed."<sup>121</sup> The roles the couple would inhabit, as symbolized by their wedding ceremony, reflected a deeper belief in the community that each person had their role, that each was equal and supportive of the other.

The Cherokee even identified the gender of a child by its future role in the community: it was either a bow or a bread.<sup>122</sup> Parents enforced these gender roles throughout Native children's adolescence and emphasized that they were necessary for a family's survival. Buffalo Bird Woman describes her adoptive mothers giving her such a lesson in her own childhood: "My mothers began to teach me household tasks when I was about twelve years old. "You are getting to be a big girl," they said. "Soon you will be a woman, and marry. Unless you learn to work, how will you feed your family?"<sup>123</sup>

For Native American women to advance in a European society, they needed to stay at home with no sway in the governmental realm.<sup>124</sup> This was the Eurocentric view of gender roles, in which men were the rule makers and the power holders.<sup>125</sup> Europeans

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<sup>121</sup> Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 24-25.

<sup>122</sup> Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 25.

<sup>123</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 90.

<sup>124</sup> Many Plains Natives were forced to give up their tipi for the "American" style homestead. The tipi was much more than just shelter; in many Plains cultures the women owned the tipi (Carter, Chappell, and McCleary, "In the Lodge of the Chickadee," 102).

<sup>125</sup> Carla Christofferson, "Tribal Courts' Failure to Protect Native American Women: A Reevaluation of the Indian Civil Rights Act," *Yale Law Journal* 101, no. 1 (1991): 178.

had a different ideal of what civilization should be like for Native American women. For Europeans, women were not the sources of power that Native Americans were used to, but rather the “helpless helpmates.”<sup>126</sup> In fact, for many Europeans, to be considered “womanly” one could not own land or property.<sup>127</sup>

Some Native women were in many respects far ahead of their European counterparts. In Ute society, women’s and men’s sexual morals were equal, as were the morals for behavior.<sup>128</sup> This lifestyle, which we may now view as forward-thinking, was not appealing to white settlers. In fact, European Americans often used the relative equality of gender roles as a reason to label Natives as “uncivilized.”<sup>129</sup> Similarly, European settlers were deeply disturbed by the amount of influence Navajo women had; they believed it was harming Navajo families because divorce among the Navajo was fairly widespread.<sup>130</sup> White settlers could not grasp a lifestyle where men and women were seen as equal and balanced.<sup>131</sup>

As Native Americans moved onto reservations, their usual roles shifted dramatically. For many Native Americans, men were typically the soldiers and hunters. Once the men were tied to a 160-acre agricultural plot, that role disappeared. Women

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<sup>126</sup> Christofferson, “Tribal Courts' Failure to Protect Native American Women,” 178.

<sup>127</sup> Virginia Scharff, “Gender and Western History: Is Anybody Home on the Range?” *Magazine of Western History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 163.

<sup>128</sup> Katherine M. B. Osburn, “Dear Friend and Ex-Husband: Marriage, Divorce, and Women’s property Rights on the Southern Ute Reservation, 1887-1930,” in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1996), 158.

<sup>129</sup> Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Carol Davis Sparks, “The Land Incarnate: Navajo Women and the Dialogue of Colonialism, 1821-1870,” in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1996), 147.

<sup>131</sup> Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 13.

previously had been “as gatherers, horticulturalists, traders, artists, medicine women, and, especially as wives, mothers, and caretakers.”<sup>132</sup> Now, government agents expected Native women to reflect their white counterparts, who had different roles in their societies. Future President Theodore Roosevelt, at the time an Indian Commissioner on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, applauded a woman of half-Native American and half-European ancestry for attempting to persuade other Native women to adopt a more European lifestyle:

Mrs. Cocer, who impressed me as being one of the most intelligent, capable, and genuinely philanthropic women I have ever met ... is doing all in her power to elevate the Indians round about, devoting herself especially to the women, striving to raise their home life.... She was the most sincere and devoted friend of the Indians, and yet, unlike too many half-breeds and educated Indians who champion the cause of the redskin people, she had not become a mere silly enthusiast about them, and made no effort to extenuate their faults or to think of them as being already on the same plane with the whites.<sup>133</sup>

Roosevelt, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the “whiter” a Native woman became, the higher she could elevate herself in society. After the arrival of Europeans, European gender roles, and forced assimilation, the status of Native American women began to shift—and not for the better.<sup>134</sup> In the words of Chief Wilma Mankiller of the Cherokee Nation, “Europeans brought with them the view that ... women were to be

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<sup>132</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 8.

<sup>133</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Pine Ridge,” in *Report of Hon. Theodore Roosevelt, Made to the United States Civil Service Commission, Upon a Visit to Certain Indian Reservations and Indian Schools in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Association, 1893), 10.

<sup>134</sup> Lisa J. Udel, “Revisions and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women’s Motherwork,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 2 (2001): 52.

submissive to them.... It was what we today call sexism. This was not a Cherokee concept. Sexism was borrowed from Europeans.”<sup>135</sup>

On reservations, agents tried to make Native women cook for their husbands.<sup>136</sup> Previously women had the task of preparing food, but usually for the broad kinship group. Now their role was to prepare a meal for the male head of household, to please only him. This marked him as the most important. Native American women like Sarah Winnemucca noted the difference between making sustenance for your entire family versus cooking to please one man. Sarah Winnemucca described an Indian Agent trying to get the Natives to stick to European-style gender roles, instructing Winnemucca and other Natives that “the women must not work in the field like the men. They can work in another way. They can cook for their husbands, and have their meals ready at noon and at supper and early in the morning.”<sup>137</sup> Winnemucca and the others were resistant because they were more than willing to work—work they had been doing all their lives. As assimilation agents forced land privatization on Native Americans, they forced “subtle subordination” on Native American women, and they forced European gender roles onto Natives.<sup>138</sup> This diminished the status of Native women, who had previously “enjoyed equal rights with men and in some cases were even considered superior to men.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Udel, “Revisions and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women’s Motherwork,” 52.

<sup>136</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 91.

<sup>137</sup> Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes*, 108.

<sup>138</sup> Forbes, “The Native Intellectual Tradition,” 25.

<sup>139</sup> Christofferson, “Tribal Courts' Failure to Protect Native American Women,” 177.



### 2.3 Focus on Male Heads of Household

In many Native societies, which tribe an individual claimed allegiance to was based not on the father's family but on the mother's. The weight given to the female line gave considerable status to women.<sup>140</sup> Among the Apache, when a couple was married the new groom joined his wife's family.<sup>141</sup> The Ojibwe people observed a similar tradition.<sup>142</sup> Ojibway women were also responsible for arranging marriages. As one adopted Ojibway recalled, "it was not the business of young men to bring home their wives. Here, said I, is our mother, whose business it is to find wives for us when we want them."<sup>143</sup>

Because of the importance of family and the matrilineal line, "clan mothers" held a special and influential role.<sup>144</sup> In some matrilineal societies, like the Iroquois, women held greater authority due to the importance of the female line. Since ancestry was traced through the female line, "women held significant status via motherhood as clan mothers with considerable political power to choose and remove tribal leaders."<sup>145</sup> The women in many civilizations, like the Iroquois, helped to make decisions in the political sphere, a

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<sup>140</sup> Kuhlmann, "American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands," 4.

<sup>141</sup> Kuhlmann, "American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands," 4.

<sup>142</sup> Buffalohead, "Farmers Warrior Traders," 242.

<sup>143</sup> Buffalohead, "Farmers Warrior Traders," 242.

<sup>144</sup> Shoemaker, "Native-American Women in History," 13.

<sup>145</sup> Roe Bubar and Pamela Jumper Thurman, "Violence against Native Women," *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (2004): 74.

direct result of their importance within the family structure.<sup>146</sup> As Europeans encountered these societies, they often ignored these traditions. In Navajo society, men were the warriors and thus did hold much of the political power.<sup>147</sup> However, European settlers who portrayed Navajo society often showed it, incorrectly, as a patriarchy with male leaders. Whether they did this purposely to mislead their audience, or due to a lack of understanding or other factors, remains unclear.<sup>148</sup>

Some Native women would keep their matrilineal name and pass it on to their daughters. This was a process that assimilation agents actively tried to break.<sup>149</sup> Europeans' incomprehension of the matrilineal family structure complicated their early encounters with Native Americans. European men wanted to interact only with their male counterparts, assuming the Native social structure was like their own. In certain instances, they "sabotaged their own treaties in making them with men who did not have the right to make such decisions."<sup>150</sup>

This matrilineal family structure changed with the passage of the Dawes Act. On the Dawes Rolls, each family was given a patrilineal surname, a practice common among European cultures but not seen before in Native American cultures. Many found it confusing.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, the agents of assimilation and the United States government would only do business with male Native Americans. They assigned allotments to the

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<sup>146</sup> Shoemaker, "Native-American Women in History," 13.

<sup>147</sup> Sparks, "The Land Incarnate," 138.

<sup>148</sup> Sparks, "The Land Incarnate," 141

<sup>149</sup> Christofferson, "Tribal Courts' Failure to Protect Native American Women," 178.

<sup>150</sup> Green, "Native American Women," 250.

<sup>151</sup> Scharff, "Gender and Western History" 64.

males and expected them to farm and work the land, a role traditionally regulated to women<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, it was only to the males that the United States government would allocate annuities.<sup>153</sup> Many Natives were not used to this; for example, the Choctaws had to change their land inheritance system after the Dawes Act.<sup>154</sup> One reason for this was that, for many Europeans, to be masculine meant owning land. Thus, Native Americans who collectively held land or who were primarily mobile instead of agricultural were viewed as not masculine.<sup>155</sup>

Native Americans were keenly aware of the differences between their family structures and those of Europeans. One Hidatsa, Buffalo Bird Woman, wrote in her autobiography: “We Hidatsas do not reckon our kin as white men do. If a white man marries, his wife is called by his name; and his children also, as Tom Smith, Mary Smith. We Indians had no family names. Every Hidatsa belonged to a clan, but a child, when he was born, became a member of his mother's, not his father's clan. An Indian calls all members of his clan his brothers and sisters.”<sup>156</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman is describing a classic matrilineal society of her Hidatsa people. There were no patrilineal last names, but children instead belonged to their mother's clan.

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<sup>152</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 9.

<sup>153</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 9.

<sup>154</sup> Painter-Thorne, “One Step Forward, Two Giant Steps Back,” 350.

<sup>155</sup> Scharff, “Gender and Western History,” 63.

<sup>156</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 66.

## 2.4 Change in Family Roles

With the passage of the Dawes Act, the family structure of many Native Americans would change. Previously, many Native women had relative autonomy and choice within their family structure. Women had say in who they married and how many children they had. Many Native American societies also stressed the importance of kinship ties. This is evident in the marriage practices of many Native societies: A new groom would live with his bride's family for at least the first few years of their marriage. The family used this time to confirm that the new groom was a valuable hunter and warrior. Usually the bride was close to her own female relatives as she learned to be a mother.<sup>157</sup> This practice would change with the Dawes Act, which severed kinship ties and forced Native women onto their husbands' individual 160-acre plots.<sup>158</sup>

Many Native American cultures had a dowry practice. However, it was quite the opposite of the European practice. The groom or his family would often present gifts, such as horses or hides, to the bride's family as an incentive preceding the wedding. Rose Mitchell, a Navajo, described such a process:

When the time arrived, all the people from his side came over here on horses. In those days, it was the practice for the man's side to give presents like horses or other property to the woman's family at the time of the marriage. So when they came, they brought lots of horses. They had plenty of those so they contributed them at the wedding to my father and mother. Sometimes it wasn't horses that were given. The custom was that all the people on the man's side would contribute to his gift to the woman's family. So, sometimes it would be cattle, or if no

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<sup>157</sup> Buffalohead, "Farmers Warrior Traders," 242.

<sup>158</sup> Prucha, "American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century," 15.

animals could be given, they'd give a belt or some other jewelry, things of value.<sup>159</sup>

Buffalo Bird Woman describes a similar process among the Hidatsa:

The young man's parents would then go back and get ready the gifts that were to be given to the parents of the parents of the girl. These were sometimes very valuable, —a war bonnet or eagle hat as we called it, a gun, and a pony, or two ponies, four ponies; even as high as ten ponies have been paid for a girl. If the groom's parents do not have the necessary amount of gifts, their relatives help them and collect gifts for them.<sup>160</sup>

It is evident from dowry traditions such as these that women had a certain amount of autonomy in deciding who they would marry. Furthermore, because of the importance of kinship ties, this decision usually was not made by the women alone but was rather a familial decision.

Buffalo Bird Woman describes a wedding ceremony in which “each of the guests was expected to bring a present, —a robe, dress, leggings, painted robe, calico, or the like. These gifts were all for the bride.”<sup>161</sup> There was no bridal dowry, as was a common European practice at the time. Buffalo Bird Woman also describes an instance happened in her own life when her parents put off such a match, fearing she was too young:

Hanging Stone walked up to my father, and laid his right hand on my father's head. “I want you to believe what I say,” he cried. “I want my boy to live in your good family. I am poor, you are rich; but I want you to favor us and do as I ask.” He went over to my mothers and did like wise, speaking the same words to both. He then strode out of the lodge. Neither my father nor my mothers said any thing, and I did not know at first what it all meant. My father sat for a while, looking at

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<sup>159</sup> Rose Mitchell, *Tall Woman: The Life Story of Rose Mitchell, a Navajo Woman, 1874-1977*, ed. Charlotte J. Frisbie (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>160</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 120.

<sup>161</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 120.

the fire. At last he spoke, "My daughter is too young to marry. When she is older I may be willing."<sup>162</sup>

Buffalo Bird Woman also relates that some women delayed or resisted marriage to certain men:

Often there was reason why the girl was in no hurry to yield. The man perhaps had already married, and wanted to discard his former wife. Then that good girl would say, "I do not want that man. It will be only a short time until he will want to leave me too!"

The kind of a man who left his wife often, frequently found it hard to get a wife. Often he would have to give a horse, or two horses, or three, or four, or five, to get her, because she would say, "You will tire of me soon, and want to put me away; but if you do, at least I want to be able to say I have some property!"<sup>163</sup>

Buffalo Bird Woman goes on to reveal that certain women resisted the institution all together: "Some women did not care for the men, and did not marry at all. Others were fond of men and kept going from one to another; just kept going to the next one."<sup>164</sup> By contrast, the idea of a European women resisting or delaying marriage was virtually unthinkable during this time period, since European women were unable to support themselves in their economies.

As shown above, many Native women had a degree of freedom and choice in who they would marry. One Arapaho woman, who remains nameless but whose story was recorded in 1933, recalls: "After the death of my first husband, I was single for two years, caring for my baby son, who was then about two years old. One day my parents told me a young man had asked to marry me. After thinking the matter over a day or two, I told my parents that I preferred to remain single for my boy's sake; so my father accordingly sent

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<sup>162</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 119.

<sup>163</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 121.

<sup>164</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 121.

word of objection to the young man.”<sup>165</sup> Among the Lakota and other Plains Native Americans, women, as well as men, made the choice to freely divorce their spouses. This ability was a source of fear among the Blackfeet, where a woman could divorce her spouse simply by placing his possessions outside the tipi she owned.<sup>166</sup> In the case of a separation or divorce, the former husband left, and only took what he originally brought to the marriage. The women kept what she had brought as well as anything mutually gained during the marriage.<sup>167</sup>

Divorce was not shameful in many Native cultures; in fact, it was shameful to resist a divorce. Buffalo Bird Woman describes the traditions and expectations surrounding divorce among the Hidatsa:

I have told you that it was our custom, when a wife left her husband to go to live with another man, that her husband let her go. This did not mean that he had no right to call her back, if he cared to do so. In old times, if a woman left her husband for another, and her husband sent for her to come back to him, she could not refuse. If she did, her new husband would say “Go back; he is your husband!” But for a husband thus to call back his deserting wife, was counted among us to be shameful thing, even while we recognized that he had the right if he chose to exercise it.<sup>168</sup>

Buffalo Bird Woman also describes what would happen to a man who resisted a divorce, which seems to have been rare:

Now there was a young man once who had two sweethearts. One of these was a clan cousin, but the young man married the sweetheart who was not a clan cousin. Afterwards, another man stole his wife from him. Instead of letting her go, as a man of strong heart should do, the husband sent a friend to her and called her

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<sup>165</sup> Truman Michelson, “Narrative of an Anonymous Arapaho Woman,” *American Anthropologist* 35 (October 12, 1933): 605.

<sup>166</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 4.

<sup>167</sup> Udel, “Revisions and Resistance,” 45.

<sup>168</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women’s Writings*, 116.

back to him. After this, he no longer went on war parties, because he feared the young men would taunt him for what he had done.<sup>169</sup>

Buffalo Bird Women speaks poorly of men who did not let their wives go if they were unhappy with the relationship. Within her culture, it seems that such a thing was not the norm:

I never heard of but two men who fought over women. One was named Lone Buffalo. His wife ran away with two young men; the three went up the river. Lone Buffalo gave chase and overtook them at White Earth river. The two young men were sitting eating. Their ponies were grazing. Lone Buffalo shot the ponies with his gun and took his wife back. Our people thought this very wrong. The whole tribe talked against Lone Buffalo. His band spoke against him a great deal. He was often made to hear remarks made against him. Another man was named His-hand-has-no-fore-finger. One night he came upon his wife lying outside of his earth lodge with a young man. His-hand-has-no-fore-finger got his hatchet and went out to kill his wife. But she dodged the blow and the hatchet hit the young man she lay with in the shoulder, hurting him severely.<sup>170</sup>

Rights such as divorce that Native women enjoyed in their societies disappeared as the agents of assimilation pushed Christianity and European morals onto them on the reservations.

Women held a special role within many Native communities, such as the Ute, because they had the ability to give birth.<sup>171</sup> While many European cultures deemed menstruation shameful, the Ute saw it as potent—so potent that they kept menstruating women separate from hunters, so that it would not impair the hunters' abilities.<sup>172</sup> The

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<sup>169</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 116.

<sup>170</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 118.

<sup>171</sup> Osburn, "Dear Friend and Ex-Husband," 159.

<sup>172</sup> Osburn, "Dear Friend and Ex-Husband," 166.



Ute did not take childbirth lightly either, due to the likelihood that the mother, child, or both could die.<sup>173</sup>

Native Americans primarily raised their children in extended kin networks.<sup>174</sup> Among the Ojibway, women had full control of the care and rearing of their children. Children themselves were often sacred, as was the bond mothers shared with them. In some cultures, such as the Ojibwe, women carried their children for the first year of their lives in a cradleboard.<sup>175</sup> This was such an important part of Ojibwe culture that there were separate words for “baby in a cradleboard” (*dakobinaawaswaan*) versus just “baby” (*abinoojiyens*).<sup>176</sup> The women also could practice a degree of family planning, something unheard of in most European societies: “the mother determined when weaning should take place, and as the Ojibway believed in practicing sexual abstinence until children were weaned, the mother had some right to decide how many children she would bear.”<sup>177</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that abortion may have been available to Native American women.<sup>178</sup>

In contrast, when early Native American women married European men, they found they lost these rights and freedoms. Native women married to European men lost the rights to their children, lost the right to divorce, and often had more children than their counterparts who married Native men. In addition, all their personal property now

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<sup>173</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> Udel, “Revisions and Resistance,” 45.

<sup>175</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 6.

<sup>176</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 17.

<sup>177</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 241.

<sup>178</sup> Buffalohead, “Farmers Warrior Traders,” 241.

belonged to their European husbands.<sup>179</sup> It is reasonable to believe that Native women had expected their family structure to continue, even if married to a white settler, and found this change startling. This was not the view of future President of the United States Theodore Roosevelt in 1893, who at the time was a Civil Service Commissioner:

There are a great many squaw-men on the reservation, and I was much impressed by the fact that even when a white man was a pretty worthless fellow, it was of the utmost possible advantage to an educated or partially educated Indian woman to marry him rather than to marry a good blanket Indian of her own race. In but few cases did I see instances where graduates of the best schools had gone back after marrying a white man, whereas, they find it wholly impossible to retain the ways of civilization if they marry a blanket Indian and live with him in a tepee. The white man is sure to have a house with two or three rooms, and is always pleased to have his wife keep the house and herself and children decent and tidy. He thus gives her a chance to keep to the standard she has reached, and to have her children educated in white ways, whereas she has no chance at all if she goes back to the Indian tepee. Of course, if she marries a half-breed or an educated Indian, who is himself trying to follow the white man's road and support himself in decency, she is just as well off.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Udel, "Revisions and Resistance," 45.

<sup>180</sup> Roosevelt, "Pine Ridge," 9-10.

## Chapter 3

“I Moaned for My Mother, but No One Came to Comfort Me....”<sup>181</sup>

An essential component of the Dawes Act was the privatization of Native American land. The United States government believed the quickest way to assimilate Native Americans would be to divide historically tribally owned lands into private 160-acre plots. Privatization resulted in substantial changes for Native women, who found themselves suddenly isolated on their nuclear family plots. The change to a European-style nuclear structure, with each household far removed from extended family, severed the strong kinship ties that had long been a part of Native cultures.

### 3.1 Change from Communally Owned Land

Native American agriculture was usually different from what the system of allotment proposed. Many of what are referred to as the “five civilized tribes” (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole) practiced a method of land organization run by their governments.<sup>182</sup> Many other Native peoples had similar concepts of united land ownership instead of individual ownership.<sup>183</sup> Many Native groups held land in

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<sup>181</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 315.

<sup>182</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 18.

<sup>183</sup> Scharff, “Gender and Western History,” 64.

common.<sup>184</sup> Others did not believe in any type of land ownership.<sup>185</sup> Allotment sought to put an end to such concepts, as evident in the wording of the Dawes Act itself:

Every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States who has voluntarily taken up, within said limits, his residence separate and apart from any tribe of Indians therein, and has adopted the habits of civilized life, is hereby declared to be a citizen of the United States, and is entitled to all the rights, privileges, and immunities of such citizens.<sup>186</sup>

When Europeans encountered non-private systems of land ownership, they considered them inferior to their own and used them as another reason to mark Native Americans as inferior to Europeans. Europeans believed that a lack of private land ownership was a sign that Native Americans were not advanced enough to develop a system for land ownership at all.<sup>187</sup>

One reason Europeans did not understand Native Americans' preexisting agricultural practices is that to many Europeans, agriculture did not really exist unless it was tied to individual land ownership; hence, the process of allotment. They did not see Native Americans growing crops on commonly held land as a form of agriculture.<sup>188</sup> Native Americans viewed land ownership differently, as Buffalo Bird Woman describes: "It was our Indian rule to keep our fields very sacred. We did not like to quarrel about our garden lands. One's title to a field once set up, no one ever thought of disputing it; for if

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<sup>184</sup> Scharff, "Gender and Western History," 64.

<sup>185</sup> McNickle, "Indian and European," 4.

<sup>186</sup> Witkin, "To Silence a Drum," 376.

<sup>187</sup> McNickle, "Indian and European," 3.

<sup>188</sup> Scharff, "Gender and Western History," 64.

one were selfish and quarrelsome, and tried to seize land belonging to another, we thought some evil would come upon him, as that some one of his family would die.”<sup>189</sup>

European settlers viewed horticulture as the quickest route to civilization.<sup>190</sup> However, they largely ignored Native American groups that were already successfully practicing agriculture because they were not doing so on individually held plots of land. Europeans also closely associated being “civilized” with the idea of individuality. Tribal ownership of land was simply not acceptable or even conceivable to the European settlers. The United States government believed that Native Americans needed to give up those cultural ideas and adopt those of an “independent yeoman farmer” in order to be truly civilized.<sup>191</sup> During this time period, campaigners for assimilation were committed to the idea that if Native Americans had allotments, they would gain other “desirable” traits of white European culture, traits “of thrift, industry, and individualism.”<sup>192</sup> The idea that private land ownership would lead to assimilation was deeply ingrained in the European mindset.

The Dawes Act was born, in part, out of the belief in “environmental determinism,” or the idea that a person’s environment shaped their behavior.<sup>193</sup> According to this model, if European settlers could change the environment of Native Americans, they could change their behaviors, cultures, and beliefs—the desired outcome being that Native Americans would become whiter. Proponents of this theory thought

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<sup>189</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Wessel, “Agriculture, Indians and American History,” 14.

<sup>191</sup> Witkin, “To Silence a Drum,” 359.

<sup>192</sup> Carlson, “Federal Policy and Indian Land,” 33.

<sup>193</sup> Carter, Chappell, and McCleary, “In the Lodge of the Chickadee,” 99.

that allotment would help Native Americans comprehend the worth of private property ownership<sup>194</sup> over the more common Native American cultural practice of communally owned land and the relationships this practice fostered.<sup>195</sup>

Towards the turn of the nineteenth century, government agents often required Native Americans to take an oath as part of the allotment process to show that they no longer would subscribe to the idea of commonly held lands. This oath included the Native American man literally turning over his bow for a plow. “This act means that you have chosen to live the life of the white man—and the white man lives by work. From the earth we all must get our living, and the earth will not yield unless man pours upon it the sweat of his brow.”<sup>196</sup> The Indian agents did not consider the lives the Natives had lived before to be work, but thought that for a man to earn a wage he must work the earth.

### 3.2 Separation from Family

The Dawes Act moved Native American families onto individual 160-acre plots. Each family was supposed to work the plot individually and act as a nuclear family.<sup>197</sup> The United States government structured this family model after the European model that was familiar to them. However, this family model was unfamiliar and jarring to many Native Americans.

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<sup>194</sup> Simonsen, “Object Lessons,” 64-65.

<sup>195</sup> Colombi, “Damned in Region Six,” 568.

<sup>196</sup> Witkin, “To Silence a Drum,” 361.

<sup>197</sup> Scharff, “Gender and Western History,” 64.

Family ties were strong among many Native nations, and family was often much more complex than the classic European nuclear patrilineal model.<sup>198</sup> Buffalo Bird Women describes how she was raised to think about her extended family: “We are taught to love everybody. We don’t need to be taught to love our fathers and mothers. We love them without being told to. Our tenth cousin is as near to us as our first cousin.”<sup>199</sup> Her idea of family goes far beyond what Europeans would describe as family: “Every child to belong to the clan of his mother; and the members of the mother's clan will be clan sisters and clan brothers to her child.”<sup>200</sup> Buffalo Bird Women describes these clan ties in greater detail:

An Indian calls all members of his clan his brothers and sisters. The men of his father's clan he calls his clan fathers; and the women, his clan aunts. Thus I was born a member of the Tsistska, or Prairie Chicken clan, because my mother was a Tsistska. My father was a member of the Meedeepahdee, or Rising Water clan. Members of the Tsistska clan are my brothers and sisters; but my father's clan brothers, men of the Meedeepahdee, are my clan fathers, and his clan sisters are my clan aunts.<sup>201</sup>

For many Natives, strong ties and connectivity within the community provided a safety net in times of trouble, one that disappeared as families were spread apart across reservations or split up altogether. Family structure changed drastically as a result of the Dawes Act. Sarah Winnemucca even claims that Native Americans chose to have fewer children as a result of their sorrow living on reservations: “My people have been so unhappy for a long time they wish now to *disincrease*, instead of multiply. The

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<sup>198</sup> Melissa L. Meyers. “American Indian Blood Quantum Requirements: Blood is Thicker than Family,” in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. by Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 231-232.

<sup>199</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 146.

<sup>200</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 34.

<sup>201</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 66.

mothers are afraid to have more children, for fear they shall have daughters, who are not safe even in their mother's presence."<sup>202</sup>

Sarah Winnemucca mentions specifically mothers' fears for their daughters, who were safe in the past but on reservations were no longer. Her language indicates fears about the daughters' sexual safety, presumably from white men. Though in 1883 Sarah Winnemucca does not come out and say it, her autobiography often alludes to the rape of Native women by white men: "One of the Indians had a sister out digging some roots, and these white men went to the women who were digging, and caught this poor girl, and used her shamefully."<sup>203</sup>

Clans or extended families played a large role in many Native governmental systems, particularly in important political decisions. In the Iroquois nation, for example, historian Nancy Shoemaker notes that "the political duties of clan mothers originated in the matrilineal clan structure of Iroquois politics, in which chiefs represented their clans in council."<sup>204</sup> Among the Iroquois, when a chief died, female representatives of his clan played a role in selecting a new chief. When a new chief was picked, the deceased chief's clan (who may not be the same clan as the new chief) could reject the choice.<sup>205</sup> Separation from extended family and clan caused a breakdown in this political structure.

This phenomenon was not unique to the Iroquois. Among the Piute, women held a similar political sway. Sarah Winnemucca writes that "the women know as much as the

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<sup>202</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 147.

<sup>203</sup> Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes*, 139.

<sup>204</sup> Shoemaker, "Native-American Women in History," 13.

<sup>205</sup> Christofferson, "Tribal Courts' Failure to Protect Native American Women," 178.



men do, and their advice is often asked. We have a republic as well as you. The council-tent is our Congress, and anybody can speak who has anything to say, women and all. They are always interested in what their husbands are doing and thinking about. And they take some part even in the wars.”<sup>206</sup>

Before privatization, Native women often worked in groups. Iroquois women, for example, worked together with other female family members to perform daily tasks such as food preparation and crop harvest. Lakota, Kickapoo, and Hidatsa women all had similar cultural practices.<sup>207</sup> Once the Dawes Act separated these women onto 160-acre plots of land, the plots themselves sometimes quite distant from each other, such cooperation was no longer an option. Their kinship ties severed, women were left to complete such tasks alone.

Not only did cooperation help women complete tasks, but it also allowed them to keep each other company while doing so. For tasks such as watching crops, to protect from crows and thieves, “two girls usually watched and sang together. The village gardens were laid out close to one another; and a girl of one family would be joined by the girl of the family who owned the garden adjoining. Sometimes three, or even four, girls got on the stage and sang together.”<sup>208</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman describes how social visits often became women helping her mothers: “Friends of my mothers also came in to sit and chat; and they often joined my mothers at whatever task they might be doing. Red Blossom would set a bowl of food before each. What she could not eat the guest

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<sup>206</sup> Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life among the Piutes*, 53.

<sup>207</sup> Kuhlmann, “American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands,” 4.

<sup>208</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 31.

took home with her. It was impolite to leave any uneaten food, as that would mean, "I do not like your cooking; it is unfit to eat."<sup>209</sup> In cases such as these, work and sociability were inextricably linked for Native women.

Buffalo Bird woman recalls groups of women coming together in times of trouble: "It was usual for the women of a household to do their own planting; but if a woman was sick, or for some reason was unable to attend to her planting, she sometimes ... invited the members of her age society and asked them to plant her field for her ... each member would take a row to plant ... when each had completed one row, there was but a small part of the field yet unplanted, all pitched in miscellaneously and finished the planting."<sup>210</sup> Once Natives lived far from extended clan and kin networks, this social safety net disappeared.

Buffalo Bird Woman talks of helping family even if it was not a time of difficulty: "We Indian women helped one another a good deal in squash planting; especially would we do turns with our relatives. If I got behind with my planting, some of my relatives, or friends from another family, would come and help me."<sup>211</sup> Much of what Native Americans considered the work of women was done in groups—groups of women formed based on family ties.<sup>212</sup> While men would continue their solitary work, the Dawes Act would remove women from their extended female kin.

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<sup>209</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 51.

<sup>210</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 24.

<sup>211</sup> Buffalo Bird Woman, *Agriculture*, 69.

<sup>212</sup> Kuhlmann, "American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands," 3.

Native Americans did their best to resist the separation brought on by the Dawes Act.<sup>213</sup> On the Utes reservation, kinship ties were so strong that many Native Americans would abandon their fields for long periods of time while staying with clan and kin.<sup>214</sup> The Crow, on the other hand, were less able to resist, as they were subject to checks by Indian agents to inspect the families' progress to assimilation.<sup>215</sup> The United States government could not or would not understand the strong cultural importance of the extended family to many Native Americans.

The breaking of kinship ties and separation of clans and tribes was not an accidental byproduct of the Dawes Act. Indeed, agricultural historian Leonard Carlson points out that one purpose of the Dawes Act was to individualize Native Americans: "These reformers were convinced that allotting land to individual families would encourage each family to farm its own land and acquire the habits of thrift, industry, and individuum needed for assimilation into white culture."<sup>216</sup> The Dawes Act was an intentional attack on the Native American culture of kinship and family. The United States government hoped to turn extended Native American families into single nuclear families.<sup>217</sup> The assumption underlying the Dawes Act was that the European model of family and home was superior, and thus any Native model was not even considered.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Berthrong, "Legacies of the Dawes Act," 338.

<sup>214</sup> Barton and Barton, "Jurisdiction of Ute Reservation Lands," 141.

<sup>215</sup> Carter, Chappell, and McCleary, "In the Lodge of the Chickadee," 100.

<sup>216</sup> Carlson, "Federal Policy and Indian Land," 33.

<sup>217</sup> Scharff, "Gender and Western History," 64.

<sup>218</sup> McNickle, "Indian and European," 11.

### 3.3 Isolation

Europeans had a different ideal of what civilization should be like for Native American women. For Europeans, women were not the sources of authority that Native Americans were used to, but rather “helpless helpmates.”<sup>219</sup> On individual 160-acre plots, far from their extended families, women suffered from isolation not previously known to many of them. Extended families and complicated kinship systems became single, nuclear, and patrilineal.<sup>220</sup>

The Dawes Act intentionally broke down the strong social ties many Native communities had. These communities provided a safety net for Natives in times of trouble. Zitkala-Sa describes how the Sioux felt about helping extended family and community: “Our aged grandparents hunger for tenderness, kindness and sympathy from their own offspring. It is our first duty, it is our great privilege to be permitted to administer with our own hands, this gentle affection to our people. There is no more urgent call upon us; for all too soon these old ones will have passed on. It is possible, indeed, to combine with practical systematic effort, a bit of kindness and true sympathy.”<sup>221</sup> In fact, it seems Native communities often had a social structure in place to care for the old, young, weak, or any others who were unable to care for themselves in one way or another. Buffalo Bird Woman describes such a structure among the Hidatsa:

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<sup>219</sup> Christofferson, “Tribal Courts’ Failure to Protect Native American Women,” 178.

<sup>220</sup> Scharff, “Gender and Western History,” 64.

<sup>221</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women’s Writings*, 335.

These relations meant much to us Indians. Members of a clan were bound to help one another in need, and thought the gods would punish them if they did not. Thus, if my mother was in need, members of the Tsistska clan helped her. If she was hungry, they gave her food. If her child was naughty, my mother called in a Meedeepahdee to punish him, a clan father, if the child was a boy; if a girl, a clan aunt; for parents did not punish their own children. Again, when my father died, his clan fathers and clan aunts it was, who bore him to the burial scaffold and prayed his ghost not to come back to trouble the villagers.<sup>222</sup>

Once the Dawes Act forced Natives onto reservations, this social structure began to unravel. The Ojibwe thought it essential to care for those in their family and community who could not care for themselves, to the extent that it was almost a moral obligation.<sup>223</sup> During the time after the Dawes Act, rates of homelessness on Ojibwe reservations soared—in a society that never had a homeless population before. In the past, if a child was orphaned, they were adopted by their extended family. Families that were struggling were taken in or assisted by other members of the family. After the Dawes Act, due to poverty, disease, lost allotments, and high mortality rates, families often could not support themselves, let alone their extended family members or other members of the community.<sup>224</sup> As the situation became more desperate and more parents were unable to care for their children, parents began to turn to Native boarding schools.

By this time government agents already expected (or in many cases forced) many Native children to attend Indian schools. These schools were usually far away from their families, causing prolonged separation between mother and child.<sup>225</sup> These types of separations had never occurred in many Native societies: female children stayed with

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<sup>222</sup> Wilson, *Waheenee*, 67.

<sup>223</sup> Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>224</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 12.

<sup>225</sup> Kuhlmann, "American Indian Women of the Plains and Northern Woodlands," 9.

their families even after marriage, the idea being that as a young woman gave birth to and raised her children, her female family members would be there to assist in the process.<sup>226</sup> Men stayed with their families until they married,<sup>227</sup> and presumably did not marry someone from a faraway clan.

Compulsory school attendance went hand in hand with the Dawes Act, and many families simply had no choice in the matter.<sup>228</sup> Some were convinced that it would be best for their children. Others, due to financial or other constraints, could no longer care for their children at home and knew at least they would be fed and clothed at school.<sup>229</sup> If families resisted, Indian agents used other methods to convince them, such as denying rations. When all else failed, they simply took children without parental permission.<sup>230</sup> Still, some families found ways to resist when possible. The Hopis turned over a group of their warriors rather than their children, and as a response the United States imprisoned the men in Alcatraz.<sup>231</sup>

Boarding schools were often far from home, so children did not often come home to visit. This was intentional; the schools worried that the children's assimilation would be slowed if they went home frequently for visits.<sup>232</sup> To further ensure that children did not return home too frequently, boarding schools required parents to pay for their

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<sup>226</sup> Buffalohead, "Farmers Warrior Traders," 242.

<sup>227</sup> Buffalohead, "Farmers Warrior Traders," 242.

<sup>228</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 122.

<sup>229</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 15.

<sup>230</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 123.

<sup>231</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 13.

<sup>232</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 43.

children's entire round-trip train ticket before a student would be approved for a visit, a steep upfront cost that also helped ensure their return.<sup>233</sup> Zitkala-Sa, a Sioux girl, went to a Native school and, like many children, found the separation agonizing. In her memoirs she described her feelings after being separated from her family: "'Oh, I want my mother and my brother Dawee! I want to go to my aunt!' I pleaded; but the ears of the palefaces could not hear me."<sup>234</sup> The boarding-school teachers did not do much to sooth Zitkala-Sa's homesickness. Her first night, they simply placed her with another student: "I was tucked into bed with one of the tall girls, because she talked to me in my mother tongue and seemed to sooth me."<sup>235</sup>

Homesickness among Native children was common in boarding schools. Native mothers viewed this as a genuine problem and responded with severe distress when they heard of their children's homesickness, but boarding schools were usually unresponsive.<sup>236</sup> Partially as a result of homesickness, runaway rates were high in boarding schools; many offered rewards to anyone who captured and returned runaways to the boarding schools. (In fact, railroads urged their employees not to let Indian children on the trains.)<sup>237</sup>

To hasten assimilation, boarding schools ignored or, more often, punished Native cultural practices. Hair cutting was one of the first and often traumatic instances of forced

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<sup>233</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 45.

<sup>234</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 314.

<sup>235</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 314.

<sup>236</sup> Child, *Holding Our World Together*, 130.

<sup>237</sup> Child, *Boarding School Seasons*, 87.

assimilation in boarding schools. Zitkala-Sa's hair was cut shortly after she arrived at boarding school:

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.<sup>238</sup>

Despite her many painful memories of boarding school, Zitkala-Sa went on to further her education, and one day taught at a Native school herself. However, it is obvious throughout her memoirs that she never quite felt at home among Europeans.

Throughout her life, Zitkala-Sa would suffer bouts of homesickness and exclusion, as when she began college: "Homeless and heavy-hearted, I began anew my life among strangers. As I hid myself in my little room in my college dormitory, away from the scornful and yet curious eyes of the students, I pined for sympathy. Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone West, to be nourished by my mother's love, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice."<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 315.

<sup>239</sup> Kilcup, *Native American Women's Writings*, 319.



## Conclusion

“I am looking into the future for the benefit of my children...”<sup>240</sup>

The Dawes Act was only in place for thirty years before legislators began to call for change. It was obvious by that time that the plan for Native Americans to become farmers had not worked out and that many had only found poverty.<sup>241</sup> Some individuals, such as Chief Sitting Bull of the Sioux, had tried to halt the Dawes Act: “I am looking into the future for the benefit of my children, and that is what I mean when I say I want my country taken care of for me. My children will grow up here, and I am looking ahead for their benefit, and for the benefit of my children's children, too; and even beyond that.”<sup>242</sup>

Before the passage of the Dawes Act, Native societies were distinct and diverse in their structures. Women played a vital role in many of those structures. The roles of Native women varied greatly from the roles many European women filled in the nineteenth century. The forced adoption of European gender roles disrupted many historically matrilineal Native American societies. With the increased focus on male heads of household, changes in family roles soon followed. These changes are evident through the voices of women like Buffalo Bird Woman, Sarah Winnemucca, and Zitkala-Sa.

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<sup>240</sup> Sitting Bull, “I Came Here to Give You Some Advice,” *Sitting Bull: The Collected Speeches*, ed. Mark Diedrich (Rochester: Coyote Books, 1998), 152.

<sup>241</sup> Carlson, “Federal Policy and Indian Land,” 35.

<sup>242</sup> Sitting Bull, “I Came Here to Give You Some Advice,” 152.

Native women had historically held substantial authority within their societies because they were integral to—and in many cases controlled—the agricultural production.<sup>243</sup> On its surface, the Dawes Act gave, or allotted, Native American families one hundred sixty acres to farm. However, the policy of forced privatization led to isolation and separation from extended family, which was deeply ingrained in the political and cultural realms of many Native American cultures. Its proponents designed the Dawes Act to assimilate Native Americans. Native American families suddenly became individual nuclear families, leaving women isolated. Today, despite the efforts of Indian Agents and the policies they enforced, Native families and extended kinship structures persist. Their communities continue to live steeped in a rich culture that was not eradicated by the Dawes Act.

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<sup>243</sup> Shoemaker, “Native-American Women in History,” 11-12.

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