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"Civilization" and Transculturation: The Field Matron Program and Cross-Cultural Contact

LISA E. EMMERICH

In 1895, after two years as a field matron in Oklahoma Territory, Eliza Lambe assessed her involvement with the Cheyenne and Arapaho women she knew. Field matrons, she noted, could not rely solely on the power of their positions or their status as Anglo-Americans to gain credibility with tribal women. Experience taught her that "the first duty of a Field Matron is to gain the confidence and respect of Indian women, impress upon their minds that she is their friend and helper and not a Critic." Lambe learned this during long hours working side-by-side with women in the Cheyenne and Arapaho communities. Doors opened in friendship, voices lifted in greeting, and tasks shared by the field matron and her Indian counterparts forged valuable cross-cultural ties. "In every way," she reported after two years, "I try to be a Mother, Sister, and friend to the Indian women and girls."

Mother, sister, and friend: Eliza Lambe's self-portrait conjures powerful images of the "bonds of womanhood" from the nine-teenth-century Anglo-American female world. It also, however, hints at something else. Given the context for her introspection, a federal program based on an ethnocentric contempt for Indian cultures, this commentary may be read as more than just a guide to success as a field matron. Her report, "The Field Matrons [sic] relationship to Indian women & Girls," acknowledges that just as

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Eliza Lambe made an impact on the Cheyenne and Arapaho women and their world, those people and that place influenced her.

Eliza Lambe's tenure among the Cheyenne and Arapaho came through a unique "civilization" program that embodied common Anglo-American expectations about the future of tribalism. For students of the American Indian experience, the assimilation era of the late nineteenth century is a topic that has been well explored by scholars during the last twenty years. Supported by reformers who described themselves as "friends of the Indian," the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) created a variety of programs designed to eradicate Indian culture and undercut tribal autonomy. Allotment, the Indian School system, and vocational and acculturation systems like the field matron program became, in the hands of these activists, formidable weapons in the war against traditional-ism.²

While these strategies of forced acculturation are familiar mileposts in the history of Indian affairs, less is known about the experiences of the Anglo-American men and women who implemented these solutions to the "Indian problem." Imbedded in the rhetoric of OIA policy makers and activists was the belief that the process of assimilation was unilateral. Under the direction of Indian Service field employees, American Indians would restructure their worlds according to an Anglo-American model of life. Secure in their own sense of cultural superiority, few officials apparently ever considered it possible that cross-cultural contact might bring these women and men to an assimilation experience of their own. The field matron program offers an unusual opportunity for scholars to explore the patterns and results of sustained interaction between American Indian women and Anglo-American women. Within the framework of "civilization" and domestic education, OIA bureaucrats intended that the field matrons would build an infrastructure of personal ties that would increase their efficacy as agents of cultural change. This expectation remained a constant throughout the lifetime of the program and unquestionably shaped the experiences of all the women—native and Anglo-American—involved. Immersion in Indian communities fostered friendships and built loyalties that brought some field matrons to different perspectives about themselves and tribal life. OIA professional standards unwittingly made them likely candidates for the Anglo-American parallel of an Indian assimilation experience.

This reversal of the "civilization" process, defined by anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell as transculturation, is not an unusual

phenomenon in American Indian history. From their initial contact with the indigenous peoples of North America onward, some Europeans and Anglo-Americans felt the pull of tribal culture strongly enough to leave their own behind.³

Hallowell suggests that cultural affiliations can change when individuals are exposed to different groups and belief systems. Variables like age at contact, length of contact, previous attitudes, and willing or forced involvement with the new cultural group may all help to determine the extent and duration of transculturation. Within the broad spectrum of the experience, a shift in affiliation can be nearly imperceptible and temporary for some; for others, the realignment may be profound and enduring. ⁴

Evaluating the interaction that did occur between Anglo-American and Indian women is challenging for several different reasons. Few records pertaining to the field matrons and their work feature statements by tribal participants revealing their views of the program. In the past, scholars have often read into this invisibility a degree of inferiority that has helped to create a false portrait of American Indians. In the case of the field matron program, the anonymity of most native participants should in no way be equated with passivity. Native women had tremendous power within their federally imposed roles as "civilization" students. Unintentionally, OIA strategies enhanced rather than diminished their chances to influence the program and manipulate its agents. This is revealed, inadvertently, through the records of field matrons struggling to parlay domestic education and the "bonds of womanhood" into tools for acculturation.

While any evaluation of field matron transculturation from the American Indian perspective remains difficult, the records that survived the program's demise in 1938 do offer a starting point for assessing the responses of field matrons themselves. The OIA initially recruited these women from the ranks of missionary and reform organizations. After the position attained civil service status in 1895, the corps incorporated an increasingly diverse pool of applicants who sought the positions for reasons that ranged from humanitarianism to the desire for a secure income. Whatever their motivation, they all accepted appointments that were among some of the most isolated and strenuous in the Indian Service.

Field matrons' official correspondence and reports may seem unlikely places to look for evidence of a shift in group affiliation. Few women took the time to consciously catalogue instances of culture shock or to deliberately analyze any personal changes

taking place as they adjusted to the field. Well aware that the OIA would take a dim view of employees validating, to any degree, cultures deemed uncivilized, those who may have perceived this transition in themselves wrote little about it. Yet these documents do offer tantalizing glimpses of women coming to terms with changing views of alien cultures and themselves. Letters to OIA officials and Indian reform advocates, along with daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual reports, chronicled their professional activities and their personal lives. Here they conscientiously reported the impact of their work on Indian women, their families, and communities. Here they also obliquely commented on the influence of native women and Indian culture on their selfperceptions and the performance of their duties. In the space between the official record and the personal account, these sources do sometimes reveal the extent to which field matrons experienced transculturation.

A starting point in the search for evidence of transculturation is the field matrons' arrival in Indian Country. Differences there in even the most mundane details of life underscored the contrast between life in the field and life elsewhere. Many found the reservation environment by turns exotic, exhilarating, and intimidating. Perhaps unconscious of the irony of her words, Lillian A. M. B. Mayhew wrote in 1904 from her post among the Hopi in Arizona that "there is no place to board. There is practically no place to live and the field matron seems ostracized from all civilized companionship."5 Josephine Babbitt, assigned to work with Paiute women in 1905, found Wadsworth, Nevada, desolate and her new home almost uninhabitable. Her first letter colorfully described her accommodations, depicting the bedbugs infesting her mattress as "antideluvia[n] monsters of the Mastodon, De Gustibus, Megatherium period, all with long snouts for boring. . . . "6 Adjustment, and the sense of alienation accompanying it, became the first tests of endurance and adaptation for the field matrons. They underscored how little the appurtenances of Victorian Anglo-American "civilization" meant in the context of fieldwork.

While living conditions and proximity to an Anglo-American community were immediate concerns, a far more important issue was acceptance of the field matrons into tribal homes. If the Indians chose not to tolerate their presence and activities, they had little hope of pursuing their duties. These initial encounters provided some of the first occasions for the field matrons to demonstrate both personal and professional flexibility. Their subsequent

accounts sometimes contain valuable clues as to their willingness to incorporate new cultural perspectives.

Personal and professional resilience proved especially important for those who needed to win over entire communities. At Santo Domingo Pueblos in New Mexico in 1903, Josephine Babbitt found the residents adamantly opposed to her presence and her work. Her agent reported to the OIA that the community members "don't want her or anyone else in that capacity [as field matron]; that they will not rent any quarters for her, nor will they permit her to live in the pueblo." Confronted by a less aggressive resistance in 1893, Julia M. French still found the Indians at Agua Caliente, California, unwilling to meet her without the local agent's formal introduction. ⁸

Individual apprehension also greeted these women when they began their work, and it heightened their sense of isolation. Mary E. Thompson, visiting a Pima settlement in Arizona for the first time in 1901, reported that the women she had come to work with fled upon her arrival. She explained that "some, not knowing what strange and foreign thing that white woman might spring on them, have been wont to show me the twinkle of their feet as they shot around huts, and across the field or desert as I approached." One woman, cornered in her home, buried herself in the straw floor matting rather than face Thompson.9

Through incidents like these, field matrons quickly learned that they could not govern the attitudes of Indian women and their communities. None of the qualifications that won them positions in the OIA field service counted for much in situations where native men and women determined levels of interaction. Responding to these situations in a variety of ways, field matrons suggested a recognition of and adaptation to what they encountered. Julia French defused tension by visiting the Agua Caliente village springs and grinding stones, meeting the local women where they felt comfortable and could control the initial encounter. Mary Thompson patiently waited for the Pima women to return. Rather than utilize this strategy with Yakima women in Washington in 1892, Dr. Emily C. Miller followed them "even into the fields, as they were shy with strangers and sometimes afraid."10 Yet her physical aggressiveness in pursuing the women gave way to forbearance when she finally met them. Like French, Thompson and Miller tried to ease their entrance into these communities by behaving with a degree of sensitivity and diplomacy that distant OIA officials might not have understood. Obviously, these women grasped Eliza Lambe's key point: Field matrons could not pursue their duties without the trust of Indian women. And this trust could only be won, not coerced.

Once settled in communities, the field matrons began their work in earnest. Based on definitions of womanhood and domesticity modeled on Anglo-American ideals, the OIA intended their efforts to touch every segment of home, family, and community life. Lessons given in cooking, sewing, and basic housekeeping techniques underscored a more subtle focus of the program. As they taught Indian women the mechanics of Anglo-American domesticity, field matrons also stressed the importance of the civilized home and the central role of wife and mother as the "proprietor and domestic magnate." ¹¹

While reformers and policy makers may have hoped for reports of rapid assimilation, those in the field found that they had to take a longer view. Like all teachers, the field matrons rapidly discovered that student interest and involvement played a crucial role in determining the extent and success of their efforts. The assumption that tribal women would be speedily converted to Victorian domestic and female culture—an assumption shared by OIA policy makers, reformers, and many of the field matrons themselves prior to their arrival—was quickly abandoned. Courting and teaching a tribal audience skeptical of Anglo-American culture required patience, energy, and creativity.

To attract Indian women to lessons in housekeeping, and to make themselves welcome visitors when traveling in the communities, field matrons exploited opportunities in ways that may have seemed unconventional to others. Mary C. Ramsey Kealear attempted to copy the relaxed attitudes of the Shoshone women around her in Wyoming in 1902 and made herself a part of any activity she found in progress on her home visits, provided it was not gambling. Her willingness to accept the pace set by the tribal women seemed to enhance her effectiveness, for she reported that the women no longer complained, "You always heap hurry." 12

Cooking lessons and murder may seem to have little in common, but Emma J. S. Alexander found in California in 1919 that she could use the Round Valley community's interest in a homicide trial to her advantage. As the court proceedings began, Alexander invited the women visiting the agency headquarters to her home for cooking lessons. Rather than competing with the trial, she scheduled her demonstration dinners around it and attracted many who lived too far away for regular visiting.¹³ Like Kealear,

Alexander found that a readiness to synchronize her work with the community's pace of life and interests won her the attention of the Indian women there. The OIA assumed that the field matrons would always lead, but fieldwork required that they sometimes accept the role of follower.

Although domestic instruction was the heart of their program, emerging relationships between field matrons and native women defined other areas of activism and influence in tribal communities. In their selection of additional duties, some women evidenced increasing confidence in their ability to gauge and bridge the cultural gap separating them from the Indians. Health care was one area where field matrons developed new roles that brought them in closer contact with native culture and traditions. Within this arena, a few endowed their concerns and efforts with an understanding of the importance of traditional healing practices.

Since the field matrons were not hired to serve as nurses, the OIA initially did not specify that any applicant have more basic medical knowledge than might be gained from home nursing experience. This was problematic for field matrons, who soon found themselves, as Annie Beecher Scoville wrote in 1901, acting as "doctor, [and] nurse." Janette Woodruff undoubtedly spoke for many of her peers as they widened their role in tribal health care, when she confessed that

when duty called me into the sphere of physician my confidence was at first weak. I experienced inward qualms and sickening chills when I saw a lone Indian coming toward my home at nightfall. . . . After the number of calls began approaching infinity, I began to accept this as part of my task, too, philosophically. Since I was expected to be doctor, nurse, surgeon [and] diagnostician When the call came, I went. 15

As their reports illustrate, the calls always came.

The majority of the field matrons adamantly opposed the efforts of traditional healers, routinely threatening to call in the military or use their Indian Service authority to curb their influence. A small group, however, employed more culturally sensitive responses to those individuals they viewed as competition. Lillian A. M. B. Mayhew, stationed in Nevada among the Paiute in 1906, found it best to accept the faith the Indians had in the local native practitioner. Thoughtfully analyzing his appeal to the community, she explained that "his work is so closely allied to their religion

or superstition that I have not found it advisable to denounce too forceably [sic] this method of doctoring." She believed the Paiute "fall back into the old ways, of course, when greatly discouraged, exactly as white people who become out of patience with their physician who does not cure them and turn to some greatly advertised patent medicine." It seems clear that Mayhew's tolerance grew out of knowledge and insights shared by community members.

Flexibility in this particular area of their work often netted unexpected windfalls of community support. During her first month with the Pima, Mary Thompson reported that she used standard medications and procedures to treat a most unusual patient, a horse badly cut by a barbed wire fence. Because she correctly recognized the scenario as a professional challenge and did not back down, her reputation as a healer grew. Lillian Malaby reported a similar response from Chevenne River in South Dakota in 1906 to her handling of a serious illness. In a situation understood by all involved to be a test of mettle, Malaby took over the treatment of a young woman, ultimately doing most of her work with the patient away from her home and the supplies she had there. Grateful family members hosted a feast to celebrate the patient's recovery and to reward Malaby's pluck and skill. 17 This willingness to innovate to suit the needs of the Indian communities stood both women in good stead in their subsequent work.

Most field matrons found it necessary to tailor their work constantly to the demands and needs of their tribal constituents. F. Helen Tonkin spoke for many of her peers in 1895 when, discussing the need to adapt her work to the conditions she found, she bluntly informed the OIA,

It is evident to any person who ever spent one week among Indians that those "Matron Reports" were gotten up by some *man* who probably never saw a Indian at his home and who had no conception of the way in which they live.¹⁸

Thirteen years later, Jessie W. Cook invited Commissioner Francis E. Leupp to the field to experience first-hand the "revelations of reservation conditions" before criticizing the work done there. Comments like these speak to an increasing sensitivity to the more subtle patterns of American Indian life and a realization that success compelled adaptation. They subtly but clearly acknowledge the influence of native women and their communities.

Living and working among the Indians gave field matrons

numerous opportunities to critically examine their own beliefs about tribal life. Perceptions for some changed only slightly, if at all. Charlotte Schulz regularly reported that she enjoyed her work with Klamath Reservation women in Oregon. Yet years spent in field service convinced her that "the Indian is a born loafer and rover." ¹⁹ Effie E. Sparks worked happily for several years in Wisconsin among the Winnebago Indians and reported good results. She nonetheless complained to OIA headquarters that those people she knew were

filthy, indolent, diseased, and degraded to a degree appalling to contemplate; and none have any higher ambition than the satisfaction of their animal wants and to be supplied with tobacco and whiskey. . . men, women, and many children.²⁰

While these two field matrons, and others like them, could profess respect and affection for individual Indians, their experiences apparently did little to alter overall ethnocentric attitudes. Theirs was, instead, a case-by-case change in outlook.²¹ These women may have lived among the Indians, but there is little to suggest that proximity resulted in any greater appreciation of or participation in their culture.

The close contact that field matrons had with tribal culture and the relationships they developed with women and men of all ages caused some of them to confront their own ethnocentrism. Although not everyone was so affected, there were field matrons who apparently began to identify more with American Indian tribal life than with the "civilization" they had left behind. The shift of group affiliation described by Hallowell became, in varying degrees, a reality for these women.

Alice May Ward, stationed for a year among the Northern Cheyenne in Montana, admitted in 1923 that her work with them "open[ed] my prejudice blinded eyes to the possibility that there was more to this people" than she had originally believed.²² Living with the Pimas, Mary E. Thompson reported that, despite the occasional hostility of individuals to her work, she had grown to love most of the Indian women and had learned "how they live, and do, and think, [and] many of their customs and needs. . . . "²³ While paternalism undoubtedly permeated their affection for the Indians, these women and others like them did evidence some attitudinal changes.

A few field matrons seem to have been profoundly affected by

contact with American Indians and their culture. Over time, these women gradually developed what appears to be a genuine sense of kinship within tribal communities. Some came to regard the reservation world as their home. Through their work with Indians, these women experienced transculturation more completely than any of their peers.

Some field matrons expressed the depth of their attachment by using their position and authority to protect tribal rights. F. Helen Tonkin made her position clear during a property dispute in the Ojibwa community at Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin. Describing to the OIA how she willingly worked to stymie encroaching local Anglo-Americans, Tonkin proudly contended that "I was put here to protect the interests of the Indians."24 Mary C. Ramsey Kealear was even more emphatic in her support of the Wind River community in Wyoming. When locals complained about Kealear's work, she hotly defended herself and her definition of a field matron's duty. She ignored local critics, she noted in a letter to the OIA, because "their knowledge of the [?] and duties of a Field Matron is about equal to the knowledge the Hottentot can have of wireless telegraphy." Kealear expressed her view succinctly: "I am not here for the white people, I am here for the Indian."25 Though agents of the United States government, Tonkin and Kealear let their actions speak for their affinities.

Other field matrons confronted fellow members of the Indian Service over their treatment of Indians. Over a two-year period, field matron Mabel E. Brown clashed a number of times with the physician assigned to the Southern Pueblos. P. T. Lonergan, superintendent of the New Mexico reservation, sought her assessment of the unidentified doctor's actions in early 1916 and received a withering critique that supported the complaints of the tribal community. A year later, under similar circumstances, Brown once again took her fellow Indian Service member to task. She complained that, in matters of health care, the physician "never seems to think it necessary to go the same day as called no matter how serious the case may be...." Heatedly, Brown asked Lonergan, "[W]hy shouldn't he make an effort, at least, to do what he is hired to do.... How he makes out his elaborate reports is a mystery to me. For these pueblos, he gets much of his data from me."26 Personal conflict and professional jealousies were commonplace features of Indian Service employee interaction and may have been a factor here. Few field matrons, though, criticized their peers in defense of Indians as freely as Brown did in this instance.

Occasionally, field matrons expressed a more personal affinity for the Indians. Stationed at the Greenville Reservation in California, Mrs. C. A. Johnson virtually adopted a young Indian woman. Taking her into her home, Johnson educated and trained the young woman to act as an assistant field matron.²⁷ Elizabeth Test, field matron to the Oklahoma Kickapoo, regularly took into her home those of all ages who needed sleeping accommodations, medical care, new clothing, and plentiful food. One of these women remembered that "I grew up and thought Elizabeth Test was my mother."²⁸

Perhaps the most striking incident in which a field matron clearly demonstrated her changing sense of affiliation involved Ida F. Clayton, stationed in 1906 at Wittenberg, Wisconsin, among the Winnebago. According to an account given by Superintendent S. A. M. Young, Clayton became infatuated with a mixed-blood Oneida man. Reservation rumor alleged that the man involved was legally married to an Indian woman whom he had abused and abandoned. In spite of such stories and the total opposition of other OIA field employees, Clayton married him and left the Indian Service. Appalled that an Anglo-American woman could behave in such a manner, Superintendent Young requested that her position be left empty until the OIA could "secure the services of a woman with a little more dignity."²⁹

Those field matrons who experienced transculturation often found it difficult to leave their adopted communities and return to Anglo-American society. Janette Woodruff ended her thirty years' service as a field matron on the Papago Reservation outside Tucson, Arizona. Contemplating her departure from the band she called "her desert people," she found that "life felt suddenly empty." Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed were equally distressed when it was time to leave the Hoopa Valley Reservation in California. After one farewell, they noted, "We have left other friends behind but we have never felt like this." Leaving the boundaries of the isolated reservation, Arnold and Reed lamented that "we are no longer members of the Steve family or of the Essie family [two individuals who had unofficially adopted them]. . . . We were white people in the white man's country."

As Anglo-American women, field matrons supervised a program designed to integrate Indians into the "white man's country." But sometimes, as the experiences of women like Clayton, Woodruff, Arnold, and Reed suggest, this process had different results. Because perceptions changed when field matrons met and

worked with American Indians, they occasionally developed strong personal ties that transcended cultural differences. These bonds of affection and respect added a unique dimension to the field matron experience for the Anglo-American participants.

In retrospect, there can be little doubt as to the overall effectiveness of this program. Despite the hopes of the OIA, domestic instruction failed as a strategy to promote assimilation. With few exceptions, field matrons found that tribal women did not wish to adopt, wholesale, "the ways of White women." Selective shoppers, they shrewdly extracted from myriad examples those skills most relevant to their own circumstances and perfected them readily. Other, less practical, lessons were ignored. Most lessons in the attributes and skills of Victorian Anglo-American "ladyhood" met with persistent indifference. Tribal women were quite content to choose their own degrees of assimilation. This did not, however, satisfy policy makers or reformers who anticipated the transformation of Indian women into agents of acculturation.

The evidence of transculturation suggests one area in which the field matron program did have unexpected, and sometimes beneficial, results. This was hardly, of course, the primary objective of OIA policy makers and activists supporting the plan. For these assimilationists, any cultural exchange that brought Anglo-Americans closer to Indian society, rather than the other way around, undoubtedly negated the meaning of the entire venture. Nonetheless, the insight into tribal culture gained by some field matrons seems to have had a positive impact on their involvement with American Indian communities.

As a result of transculturation, some women developed a more activist definition of a field matron's duties. Greater sensitivity gained through cross-cultural contact sometimes created opportunities to expand their work far beyond the boundaries of domestic education. When F. Helen Tonkin, Elizabeth Test, and Mary C. Ramsey Kealear supported individual Indians and their communities, they introduced new patterns into the Indian-Anglo-American relationship governed by the OIA.

Under the auspices of the field matron program, Anglo-American transculturation sometimes emerged as a by-product of the effort to assimilate American Indian women. While not many Anglo-American women fully experienced the shift in group affiliation that is the hallmark of A. Irving Hallowell's definition, some did change. They became thoroughly accustomed to their professional environments and learned to work with individuals,

families, and entire communities. Not every one became a "mother, sister, and friend" to the Indian women. Existing evidence does indicate, though, that some field matrons did develop different perspectives, thanks to their intimate participation in tribal life. The diversity of their assimilation experiences offers genuine testimony to the tremendous impact of sustained cross-cultural contact.

Given the intent of the field matron program, this "civilization" of certain Anglo-American women through connections to tribal culture is one of the great ironies of the experiment. An even more profound paradox is the fact that even those women who experienced the most meaningful changes in attitude apparently never questioned the appropriateness of their presence in the American Indian communities. No field matron ever addressed, on the basis of a newly developed understanding of tribal culture, the legitimacy of the policies she and her peers carried out. Individual transculturation did not result in internal challenges to the program. Ultimately, the experiences of women like Janette Woodruff, Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed, and Eliza Lambe only gave the assimilation strategies they implemented a more benevolent face.

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NOTES

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