

Their Work Was Never Done

Women Missionaries on the Kiowa-Comanche Reservation

*By Rebecca Herring**

In 1896 Baptist missionary Isabel Crawford moved from the relative security of Elk Creek Mission to the isolated Kiowa camp at Saddle Mountain. "Yesterday and today," she recorded in her diary, "brought many Indians in on horseback to see if the report was really true that a white woman was all alone among them."¹ Although her solitary work on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation was hardly typical, the fact of her presence suggested that women played a major role in implementing the assimilation policy at the turn of the century. Hoping through Christianity and education to smooth Indian transition from nomadic to settled life, mission women went in surprising numbers to the Kiowa-Comanche reservation in southwestern Indian territory.

It was obvious to observers of late nineteenth-century America that marked differences existed between the dominant Anglo-American culture and minority Native American cultures. Rather than acknowledge those differences as acceptable and of equal value in a nation fashioned from diverse cultural backgrounds, many Americans tended to view Indian life as deficient.² Anglo society, on the other hand, they considered to be superior because it had reached a higher stage of development in cultural evolution.³ This supposed inequity in levels of civilization served as moral justification for the widespread conviction that "Native Americans must be reformed according to White criteria and their labor, lands, and souls put to 'higher uses' in line with White goals."⁴ Certain that native and

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white peoples could never live in harmony if each group retained its cultural identity, and led by feelings of social responsibility toward a seemingly inferior race,⁵ those in control of Indian affairs concluded that "the only practical and humane answer to the Indian problem was to assimilate the Indians into Anglo-American culture."⁶

Women filled leading positions in most stages of this assimilation policy. They were active workers in both eastern support organizations and western field service, "No uncivilized people are elevated till the mothers are reached. The civilization must begin in the homes," wrote Merial Dorchester, a special agent in the Indian School Service who felt the answer to successful assimilation lay with Indian women.⁷ "It is very clear to those most closely studying the 'Indian problem,' " she reported, "that the elevation of the woman is . . . the key to the situation. . . . Children start from the plane of the mother rather than that of the father. Therefore, the great work of the present is to reach and lift the woman and the home."⁸

To these missionaries, Christianity was an indispensable factor in the Indian assimilation process. When Amelia S. Quinton, in her 1885 report on the missionary work of the Women's National Indian Association, wrote that "the longest root of hope for the Indian is to be found in the self-sacrifice of the Christian Church," she expressed the sentiments of most Indian reformers.⁹ Believing "that nothing but Christianity could elevate the Indians: that there was no hope for them in education or civilization, except as these were employed as instruments of the gospel," missionaries, both male and female, went willingly to Indian reservations to Christianize America's native peoples.¹⁰ When denominational interest in the Kiowa and Comanche developed during the 1870s, missionaries, including several new graduates of a recently established women's missionary training school, traveled to southwestern Indian Territory to "devote their lives to the teaching of pure gospel among the dusky tribes."¹¹

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century missionaries worked among the Indians unmolested by federal intrusion, and often with federal blessing. Lacking its own education program, the government encouraged the establishment of mission schools it hoped would teach American values, customs, and religious practices to Indians. In the late nineteenth century it financially supported religious educational facilities through a contract system whereby mission groups were paid a small stipend per annum for the physical support and secular education of each Indian child. This mutually beneficial program provided each group with the elements it lacked to carry out its work;

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the government was able to provide promised educational facilities and civilizing agents at a low monetary investment, while missionary groups were provided with needed capital to carry out their Christianizing and "civilizing" endeavors.¹²

Women, who made up the largest part of church membership during the nineteenth century, were essential to mission organizations. Accepting the nineteenth-century belief that women were natural civilizers responsible for the morals and education of their families, church leaders maintained that women, "by their active spiritual sympathy, and by their facility for organization, are capable, more than the other sex, of giving to the missionary cause the universality of co-operation which is so essential to the full rigor of its work."¹³ Taking an active role in both foreign and home mission programs church women formed mission societies, raised money, collected and distributed clothing, and sponsored educational programs designed to publicize the downtrodden condition of the "heathens" and the needs of missionaries who ministered to them.¹⁴

Some women, not content to limit their activities to a supportive role, became actively involved in mission field work. A desire to devote their active lives to Christian work, and a probable longing for an element of adventure normally not allowed nineteenth-century women, combined with sympathy for their "heathen sisters" to create a group of women ready to travel west to live and work among American Indians.

Attempts to transform the Indians into model American citizens through Christian principles was to be accomplished by the im-



By the 1890s the plains Indians of Oklahoma were caught between the old world of nomadic life and the new world of forced acculturation (Courtesy OHS).

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plementation of specific educational programs. Missionaries went to the tribes to “teach these [Indians] to make, and properly keep comfortable homes; to teach them domestic work and arts; how to prepare food and make clothing; how to care for the sick and for children; to respect work and to be self-supporting; as far as practicable, to teach them the English language; and, above all and constantly, to teach them the truths of the Gospel, and to seek their conversion to genuine and practical Christianity.”¹⁵ Since most of these programs centered on home and family—the domain of women—it was deemed necessary to send women to Indian reservations to insure adequate instruction.

A large percentage of mission workers on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation were women, serving as a vital part of that work from its earliest years. Constructing a clear picture of their lives on the reservation, however, is not an easy task. Although several felt that “in these early days we are making history and it is right a record should be kept,” the diaries, journals, and reminiscences compiled by women missionaries fell far short of providing an unbiased, objective historical record.¹⁶

Most writers had a definite purpose in mind. Isabel Crawford wrote her reminiscence *Joyful Journey* in order “to help everybody: children to give their hearts to Jesus, young people their lives, and grown ups their cash.”¹⁷ Her goal in writing *Kiowa* was even more altruistic: “to contradict the idea that ‘the only good Indian is a dead one.’”¹⁸ To accomplish this objective she admitted that her notes hastily written on the reservation were “condensed later to leave out all that was hardest and most disagreeable.”¹⁹

Religious workers and their editors, in addition, were reluctant to discuss events and customs they felt would be detrimental to their cause. Mary Jayne never recorded some of her experiences and thoughts. After witnessing a ghost dance she wrote, “I can’t discribe [*sic*] these things, there is too much of horror in them to me.”²⁰ She likewise failed to relate her feelings concerning the actions of some Indian men, stating that “I do not think it wise to commit all my thoughts to paper especially as it could in no wise edify or instruct.”²¹

Although missionaries’ written accounts cannot be used to construct an accurate picture of Indians or Indian culture, these works do yield information about the individual missionaries, their lives on the reservation, their duties, their attitudes toward their work, and their attitudes toward the Indian people among whom they worked.

Both married and single women worked on the reservation. Mar-

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ried women came with their husbands who usually were ministers and missionaries. Sometimes they were appointed by mission societies as missionaries in their own right, but more often they went as wives of appointed missionaries. These women, whatever their official status, accepted responsibility for mission work as well as for the care of their families. This dual responsibility created inner conflict in women torn between their desire to fulfill their duties as God's emissaries responsible for Indian salvation, and their duties as Christian wives and mothers responsible for the well being of their families. Crawford recorded: "poor Mrs. Hicks and her two babies are to be pitied, and she is such a nice little wife and mother. She would like to go to all the meetings and help in everything, but she can't, and worries about it more than she ought."²² Magdalena Becker likewise was torn between her work and her children. Ready to embark on their first trip to the Indian camps, Becker remembered that "I was glad to go, yet sad, for I hated to leave my three babies."²³ Mission duties apparently did little to stop the growth of mission families. Soon after returning from this trip to the Indian camps, Becker gave birth to her fourth child.²⁴

Single women who traveled to the Kiowa-Comanche reservation most often were sent and supported by women's mission societies. Several were graduates of schools, such as the Chicago Baptist Missionary Training School, established expressly to educate single women for mission field work. Women missionaries often felt that they had been individually called by God to serve among the Indians. Becker, despite her concern for her children, "decided it was our duty to go among the Indians and work and that our babies would be cared for at home by a girl we had working for us."²⁵ Crawford, distraught after learning of her mother's death, decided she could not leave the Indians because "God had called me to give them the gospel."²⁶ Although she had been raised to think that women "were supposed to become good wives, mothers, and housekeepers" only, she had been convinced by teachers in the Chicago mission school "that God calls 'women' into full time service as well as men."²⁷ That service, however, was not to be the same as the service of men; "God called women . . . not to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, but to go into all the world and teach it in a simple womanly way."²⁸

Arrival at the reservation as an unmarried woman did not insure that one would remain so. While many single women continued to work as missionaries for years, others married and left the reservation. K.E. Bare departed when she married C.C. Cooper, and Ida Roff

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Women missionaries often traveled to Indian camps, holding gospel meetings and visiting with Indian families (Courtesy Western History Collections).

discontinued her work after marrying an Episcopal priest in 1893. Still others married male missionaries and continued to live on the reservation, dividing their time, like other mission wives, between their mission work and their families. When Dutch Reformed missionary and teacher Maude Adkisson married missionary L.L. Legsters, she turned her administrative duties over to a Miss Moore and moved from the Apache school at Fort Sill to the new mission north of Lawton townsite. Ida Swanson, missionary and school teacher at Methvin Institute, married John J. Methvin following the death of his first wife, Emma. She continued to take an active part in both school and mission work.²⁹

Some women missionaries left the reservation because of ill health exacerbated by the harsh physical conditions in which they lived. Housing was always a problem, tents and sheds providing the first form of shelter for many new missionaries. Crawford spent her first five weeks at Saddle Mountain living in a tipi near an Indian camp. After enduring constant rain, and the destruction and scattering of food, clothing, bedding, and literature by pigs on three occasions, she

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was invited to share the two-room home of her Indian interpreter and his family.³⁰

Most missionaries, especially those living in the Indian camps, faced the same conditions and privations their Indian companions did. They endured wind, cold, rain, flood, blizzard, prairie fire, and heat. Roads, often muddy or near non-existent, made travel difficult. They carried water, chopped wood, fabricated furniture, washed clothes, and procured and prepared food, often without male help and all in addition to the regular mission duties.³¹ Money was often scarce, provided along with clothing and domestic items by sometimes unreliable donations from mission societies. In October of 1900 Mary Burdette warned Crawford and Bare to "be careful of your money for I don't know when you will get any more. The Churches and circles are slow in sending their offerings and the bank has shut down on us."³² When no money arrived by December 16, the two missionaries, having exhausted their resources, borrowed ten dollars from a local bank.³³

Realizing the effects of such hardships on their physical and mental health, missionaries often took steps to protect themselves. Mary McLean, who worked with Crawford at Saddle Mountain for two years, wrote that "during the first three months we lived with the Indians, eating with them, camping with them, and constantly visiting in their tepees, but found that our health would not last long if we kept up that kind of life; so with the new year, we began living like white people."³⁴ Most missionaries also took annual vacations from the reservations to visit friends and family and report on their work to those who provided their support. These vacations often found them exhausted from their strenuous lives. Crawford reported that "coming direct from their fields of labor, they [missionaries] feel and are worn out, tired out, shabby, tanned beyond recognition, and sometimes inclined to snap."³⁵

In addition, some women missionaries and missionary wives, in order to supplement their meager incomes, took positions as full or part-time field matrons for the United States government. Established by Congress in 1891 as a counterpart to the farm training program for Indian men, the Civil Service Field Matron program employed women to teach domestic skills to Indian women.³⁶ Finding qualified women willing to live on isolated reservations, however, proved to be a difficult task. Many of the women hired for the position were former missionaries already aware of the rigors of reservation life. Laretta Ballew, the first full-time field matron at the Kiowa-

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Comanche reservation, originally went to work with the Kiowa as a Baptist missionary.³⁷ The problem of a limited supply of women also was circumvented by providing for the hiring of part-time assistant field matrons, paid less than \$300 per year and thus exempted from civil service testing. Almost all of the assistant field matrons appointed to the Kiowa-Comanche reservation at the turn of the twentieth century were wives of missionaries.³⁸ Ella Carithers, whose husband served at the Reformed Presbyterian Cache Mission School, became an assistant field matron in 1898. Mary A. Clouse, appointed in 1903, was the wife of the Baptist missionary to the Kiowa at Rainy Mountain. Anna M. Deyo, also hired in 1903, was married to Elton Cyrus Deyo, the Baptist missionary near Fort Sill.³⁹

With the exception of Ballew, these women seldom separated their duties as field matrons and federal employees from their duties as missionaries sent by religious organizations. They seem to have continued their missionary work exactly as they had prior to becoming assistant field matrons, with the additional task of writing a monthly report in return for receiving a monthly check of \$25. Their reports are filled with accounts of their mission work. In June of 1904 Clouse reported that she assisted in five funerals, fifty-eight religious services, a camp meeting at the mission, and several baptisms. Likewise, Deyo in November of 1903 gave an elaborate account of the Indian members of her congregation packaging and sending Christmas gifts to the Hopi in Arizona.⁴⁰

While missionary wives tended to see matron work as merely an extension of mission work, full-time field matrons approached their tasks professionally. Ballew, although a former missionary, carefully reported the number of women to whom she taught each domestic skill. She reviewed the progress of individual women in her district and requested materials such as churns, fabric, buckets, washboards, and brooms with which to work.⁴¹

Whatever the hardships involved, women missionaries on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation seemed to think they were far outweighed by the rewards. Their belief that they were following the will of God, and that the Indians would benefit by their efforts, inspired missionaries to work on in the midst of adversity.

The attitudes of Anglo women missionaries toward the Indians among whom they worked ran the entire gamut of emotion, from fear to admiration, disgust to sympathy, pity to love. First impressions, in addition, were not always lasting ones. Feelings that existed when women missionaries initially encountered their Indian clients some-

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times changed as they became more familiar with the Indians and their lives. When Crawford first learned that she was to be sent to the Kiowa she was surprised and shocked. "I did not want to go to the 'dirty Indians,'" she wrote years later, "and nearly cried my eyes out over the thought of it." Her years of work apparently changed her mind. "Later," she continued, "I nearly cried them back in again because I didn't want to leave them."⁴²

Seemingly incompatible emotions concerning Indians existed side by side in some Anglo women. Crawford at times described the Indians with whom she worked as possessing qualities of "dignity, reverence, generosity, and businesslike manliness with honesty."⁴³ At other times she referred to them as "poor, needy, and backward."⁴⁴ While Helen Brewster was shocked by the mourning customs of the Comanche, she described Comanche leader Quanah Parker as "one of the kindest, pleasantest gentlemen to talk to."⁴⁵

Women missionaries often had difficulty accepting Indian customs, especially those that differed greatly from Protestant Anglo-



Indian missions served as social centers where missionaries provided meals, hosted sewing circles, and taught Bible classes (Courtesy Ft. Sill Museum).

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American practices. Shocked by what they perceived to be “uncivilized” and “peculiar” habits, missionaries discouraged polygamy, peyote worship, ghost dances, and dividing the possessions of the dead.⁴⁶ When Brewster found one of the recent widows of an Indian man gashing her face and arms in mourning, she “begged her not to further mutilate herself” but found that she could not comfort the woman.⁴⁷

Although they claimed admiration, friendship, and even love for the Indians, missionaries were often condescending in their words and actions.⁴⁸ Campbell, apparently disregarding the fine bead quill work created by Plains Indian women, maintained that “very few of them ever quilted quilts as they didn’t seem to have the patience that white women did.”⁴⁹ Dora Martin, unhappy with the manner in which the Kiowa used supplies sent by Anglo churches, stated that “many of these articles were valuable, but the Indians wasted them . . . taking anything that happened to suit their fancy to dress themselves.”⁵⁰

Hard work with few results characterized the early years of mission life on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation. Because the Indians often lived in isolated camps and moved frequently, building permanent congregations was difficult. Mission work, therefore, had to be individualized and mobile in order to be effective.⁵¹ Women missionaries were active in all aspects of this work. In conducting public religious services, they often provided a supportive role while male missionaries filled the positions of authority. Women sometimes spoke at gospel camp meetings and helped with Sunday services at Indian churches when a minister was not available, but more often their contributions were on a personal level. Believing that “nothing wins the confidence and esteem of the Indians more quickly than these weekly visits in their camps,” they visited Indian women and families, reading the Bible, praying, and talking with them about Christianity.⁵² Women missionaries, in addition, worked with government boarding schools conducting bi-weekly, non-denominational services for Indian school children.⁵³

Missionaries, searching for ways to win the confidence—and thus the ear—of the Indians, took on tasks they felt would provide assistance to people confronted by unfamiliar and often confusing Anglo culture. Women missionaries sometimes served as liaisons among Indians, governmental agencies, and the public. They also provided assistance in health care and burials, two areas traditionally considered the realm of women’s work. Ida Methvin maintained that

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Most women missionaries directed their attentions to Indian women and girls, teaching new domestic skills and promoting Christianity (Courtesy Ft. Sill Museum).

ministering to the sick was one of her major duties when visiting in Indian camps.⁵⁴ Believing that death offered missionaries the opportunity to discuss eternal life, women missionaries offered their services when deaths occurred in Indian families. When a newborn baby died at Saddle Mountain in February of 1897, Crawford fashioned a coffin from a wood chip box, conducted the funeral, and assisted in digging the grave. Only a few days later she repeated the process, this time for a five-year-old girl claimed by consumption.⁵⁵

Hoping to encourage the Indians to accept responsibility for their own affairs, as well as to instill in them ideas of Christian charity and evangelism, women missionaries formed mission societies made up of their Indian converts. At Society meetings missionaries taught Indian women, and sometimes men, to sew, told Bible stories, and led group prayers. Held in the homes of individual members, the meetings gave Indian women the opportunity to learn and practice Anglo-style entertaining. The group at Saddle Mountain made and sold quilts, using the proceeds to finance in part a church building for their congregation, and to help support the Hopi Indian mission.⁵⁶

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Hoping "to prepare them [Indians] for the settlement of the country around them by whites and the consequent influx of civilian notions and ideas to which they would otherwise be strangers," women missionaries taught Indian women to cook, keep house, and care for the sick, while encouraging Indian men to work hard, cultivate fields, and build permanent houses.⁵⁷ Mission women in addition encouraged light industry and the saving and wise use of money earned. Ella Carithers established a broom factory operated by her female students, the proceeds of which contributed to the upkeep of the Cache Mission. Crawford, in an effort to encourage wise money management, allowed "different thrifty Indians" to deposit money in her care for safekeeping.⁵⁸

Because they visited in Indian homes and established personal relationships with native women, missionaries had the opportunity to transmit Anglo cultural ideas, something that might have been impossible in a more structured setting. In 1906, when Crawford traveled to the East with four Christian Indians, she stressed the necessity for personal hygiene and good manners in Anglo society. In addition, she conveyed her views on the roles of men and women in nineteenth-century Anglo-America when she attempted to explain to the Indians the distinct roles of men and women in the church. She told them that "men work at big things and when they stop they sit down. Women work at many little things. Their work is never done."⁵⁹

And so it was with women missionaries on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation; they worked at many little things, and their work was never done. Laboring to Christianize, and thus "civilize," the Indians, they reported that "it was a privilege to guide such people in the Jesus Road, and incidently help them to higher standards of living."⁶⁰ Their presence, without a doubt, had an influence on the Indians with whom they worked. In 1902 there were 519 Indian church members on the reservation, while missionaries had made contact with most other Indians through camp meetings, schools, church services, or home visits. It is unlikely, however, that their presence had the impact envisioned by those concerned with Indian assimilation. The Kiowa, Comanche, and affiliated tribes did not throw off their old lives and immediately accept Anglo-American culture when it was presented to them. Most, instead, held to their old habits as long as possible.⁶¹

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ENDNOTES

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42; *Kiowa*, p. 8. See also Mary Jayne to Girls, December 6, 1896, Mary Jayne Collection.

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³⁶ Indian Appropriations Act, approved March 3, 1891, in U.S. *Statutes at Large*, XXVI, 1009. For further information concerning the field matron program and field matrons on the Kiowa-Comanche Reservation see Rebecca Jane Herring, "Failed Assimilation: Anglo Women on the Kiowa-Comanche Reservation, 1867–1906" (Unpublished master's thesis, Texas Tech University, 1983).

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⁴³ Crawford, *Kiowa*, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Crawford, *Joyful Journey*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Helen Brewster, *Woman's Missionary Advocate*, June 1895, p. 376, quoted in Walter N. Vernon, "Methodist Beginnings Among Southwest Oklahoma Indians," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 58 (Winter, 1980–1981), p. 405.

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⁴⁹ Interview with Campbell, p. 244.

⁵⁰ Interview with Dora Martin, May 4, 1937, *Indian Pioneer Papers*, W.H.C., O.U., Vol. 60, p. 445.

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⁵³ Martha Leota Buntin, "History of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Wichita Indian Agency" (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1931), pp. 114–15; Dane, "History of Baptist Missions," pp. 80–81; Interview with J. J. Methvin, pp. 331–32; Interview with Martin, pp. 444–45; Vernon, "Methodist Beginnings," p. 406; Wild, "History of Education," pp. 147–48.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mrs. J. J. Methvin (nee Ida Swanson), p. 437; Interview with Campbell, p. 241.

⁵⁵ Crawford, *Kiowa*, pp. 56–61; Interview with Mary Mount Huff, May 12, 1937, *Indian Pioneer Papers*, I.A.D., O.H.S., Vol. 30, pp. 98–99, 101; Lawrence, *Pioneer Women*, pp. 31–32.

⁵⁶ Interview with Becker, pp. 360–61; Crawford, *Joyful Journey*, pp. 77–79; *Kiowa*, pp. 105, 155; Dane, "History of Baptist Missions," pp. 78–79; Wild, "Education of Plains Indians," pp. 142, 150.

⁵⁷ J. J. Methvin, *Woman's Missionary Advocate*, July 1891, p. 8, quoted in Vernon, "Methodist Beginnings," p. 404; Dane, "History of Baptist Missions," pp. 197–98.

⁵⁸ Botkin, "Indian Missions of Episcopal Church," p. 42; Crawford, *Joyful Journey*, p. 701; Wild, "Education of Plains Indians," pp. 131, 170.

⁵⁹ Crawford, *Joyful Journey*, pp. 80–83; *Kiowa*, pp. 87–88; Wild, "Education of Plains Indians," p. 136.

⁶⁰ Crawford, *Joyful Journey*, p. 68.

⁶¹ Ernest Wallace, "The Comanches in the White Man's Road," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook*, Vol. 29 (October, 1953), pp. 5, 28–29; Dane, "History of Baptist Missions," pp. 197–99; Vernon, "Methodist Beginnings," p. 409; Wild, "Education of Plains Indians," p. 148.

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