

Arapaho Journeys*. Sara Wiles. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011. 256 pp.

Reviewed by Jeffrey D. Anderson

Arapaho Journeys is a poignant and unique photo-ethnography illustrating and describing the lives, events, issues, and recent history of the Northern Arapaho people on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. After a brief introductory section, the body of the text offers a series of forty-six short chapters organized chronologically into three periods in the author's thirty-five years of experiencing, working in, and photographing the Northern Arapaho nation. Each small section includes one to several black and white photographs framed by a brief narrative combining diverse first-person and third-person ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and biographical voices. Both the prose and images are direct, clear, and economical. The majority of the chapters are biographical portraits of unique Arapaho persons while several others focus on core issues or activities in the communities, such as language revitalization, basketball, naming, ranching, and memorializing loss. Viewing the images and reading through the sketches, the reader follows the diverse life paths of men and women of all ages, including some who have "gone home" (i.e., passed away), though the lives of children and young people are also woven into various narratives.

The book is accessible to popular readership, but offers many layers of description for anthropological and ethnohistorical inquiry and pedagogy. Though unencumbered by academic jargon and concerns, the journey of images illustrates the underlying complexity of reservation life while tacitly countering stereotypes and misconceptions. Wiles notes, though, that her lens has not turned to all things in the Arapaho community and thus is not intended as a comprehensive account. For example, she intentionally avoided photographing events involving highly sacred matters, private activities (e.g., funerals), or alcohol consumption. Some controversial topics remain in the shadows or only lightly touched upon. On balance, though, many sides of Arapaho life that have been silent or only whispered about in the existing literature are encompassed in *Arapaho Journeys*, such as many facets of women's lives today and in reservation history, the quotidian culture of reservation life, and the visible as opposed to just oral or dialogical side of culture.

The remarkable images themselves are drawn from film photography and not digitally processed or enhanced. Based on my own knowledge of Wind River life, the images evoke the personality of unique individuals with uncanny accuracy and the unique Arapaho spirit of events. Some photographs are of posed subjects, but no staging or embellishment is evident to the eye. Many images evince a sense of motion in the lives of people and culture in action, from horse racing to butchering to beadwork and many other activities. Many also offer a window into the built environment and social landscape of the reservation community. Most important, unlike photographic images captured on the fly by well-known photographers of the past or present day tourists and transient researchers, all images are contextualized, that is, framed in the living

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space-time, life histories, and inner lives of actual people. In all, the volume offers an excellent instructive model for how to contextualize photographs for various media and genres, such as ethnographies, museum exhibits, digital displays, and ethnohistories. Most of all, it shows how one can transcend the often misplaced and overly reflexive critical voices in anthropology, history, and Native American studies. One of the ongoing issues researchers like Sara Wiles confront is how to translate their deep connections to a Native American community in ways that will not be distorted by academic and popular perspectives positioned on the outside. *Arapaho Journeys* frames all such questions within the Arapaho pragmatic context of doing things “in a good way.”

That contextualization is based on the deepest and longest experience any non-Indian researcher (though her position transcended both those labels long ago) has maintained in the Northern Arapaho community. When I arrived in 1988 I first saw her photographing events. While my first reaction was an assumption that she was just some tourist or researcher, I soon noticed that her lens did not create the same sort of uneasiness and sharp looks that intrusive and transient lenses often engender. She learned to walk, sit, speak, and take pictures in a good way, with quiet movements, soft speech, and great respect in the flow of everyday life. Over the years, she has also generously helped many other researchers, me included, find their way into and along the roads of Wind River.

In form, *Arapaho Journeys* evokes the cultural pluralism among the many roads to becoming and being Arapaho. It therefore challenges non-Indian stereotypes of Arapahos, older anthropological concepts of a uniform culture, and the tendency of academic, external frames to focus only on the history supposedly shared collectively. The stories of unique individuals and their relations reveal the many ways of actually living Arapaho culture, including beadwork, flower making, cooking, singing, military service, singing, naming, education, hunting, ranching, and many traditional secular and sacred practices ranging from the new to the very old.

Along these many roads in *Arapaho Journeys*, folks struggle, resolve, and at times just learn to live with the many contradictions, conflicts, and crises of reservation life by drawing on old traditions, inventing new ones, or using their creativity to move through hardship. Contrasts permeate the images and narratives, such as between comedy and tragedy, the light and heavy loads people carry, health and illness, youth and old age, life and death, new and old traditions, and gain and loss. Throughout the journey there is a shadowing sense of loss, as Wiles reflects in the epilogue, for folks who have gone home, for language and culture disappearing, and for past times when, ironically, the struggles were harder but life was better. That sense made it difficult for me, at times for long periods, to keep moving through the stories and images of people and pasts I know intimately. Yet, there is truth in it all.

There are many roads to ethnography, too, and Wiles has followed a uniquely long and wide one here. Overall, the central paradox this volume poses is that while it is perhaps a model for how to present a respectful, authentic, and engaging photo-ethnography to represent an indigenous community, it is based on what for the vast majority of researchers is an inimitable experience. Nonetheless, it does offer an example of how ethnography can be done in a good way, meaning that one must spend time in the community, have respect for all life roads, and be able, as Arapahos say, to “watch on” and learn rather than just asking too many questions. It also means doing all things by not forcing them or doing them too fast, so that one can, as elders often say, “get one’s mind around it.” I know it took Sara Wiles a long time and some struggles to get her

mind around this book, and the brilliant result is a sense of “watching on” rather than intruding with a piercing gaze into Arapaho lives. Many of the roads followed in this journey end in silence without excursus. This raises the nagging question, at least one with which mainstream academic reviewers seem obsessed, as to how far a writer should go to break those silences by speaking more about one’s place in it all, the deeper causes of social problems, or generating exegesis to feed academic eyes that often demand it. On this point, *Arapaho Journeys* is a lesson in how to learn from silences in a good way.

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