

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Tell Me, Grandmother: Traditions, Stories, and Cultures of Arapaho People. By Virginia Sutter.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2j16v5xp>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Anonymous

Publication Date

2005-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Tell Me, Grandmother: Traditions, Stories, and Cultures of Arapaho People.
By Virginia Sutter. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2004. 168 pages.
\$45.00 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

Virginia Sutter, an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Indian Nation who earned a PhD in public administration in 1995, was born about a century after her great-grandmother, Goes In Lodge (ca. 1830–1876). In this very interesting book, Sutter “intertwines” their life stories in the form of “a series of imagined conversations” (2), each telling the other about herself, generally taking turns chapter by chapter in chronological order to describe each one’s childhood, adolescence, first marriage, and so forth. Maintaining a conversational style while relaying the historical and cultural context of two very different lives is a daunting challenge, and its difficulty makes the book, particularly its first chapters, somewhat disjointed. Granddaughter occasionally seemed to lecture grandmother about key events in early-nineteenth-century Indian-white relations, and each “listener” sometimes made comments that disrupted the narrative flow and sounded intrusive. Separating the life stories might have improved the book’s clarity, but the author’s commitment to the idea of creating a dialogue emphasized the contrast between lives that were three generations yet light-years apart.

The autobiographical chapters drawn directly from the author’s memory are rich with detail and fully embedded in their emotional context, though they sometimes lack the precise dates and historical context readers find helpful as markers. The third child of an Arapaho man and a white woman who divorced shortly after her birth, Virginia Sutter was raised by her maternal grandparents, with her mother’s older brother, Lester, taking a most active part as her mentor. This white family, who lived on a ranch bordering the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, was very respectful of Native people and culture. In his youth, Uncle Lester had decided not to marry the Arapaho woman he loved, fearing rejection by both communities, but he remained friendly with many people on the reservation and taught young Virginia to be proud of her Indian heritage. This was not easy; as one of the only visibly Indian children in border-town schools, she encountered a great deal of prejudice. Transferring to Haskell, she enjoyed making friends from many different tribal backgrounds but hated the boarding school’s military discipline and the “personal degradation” of lice inspections by “cold and impersonal” matrons (87). She dropped out after one year and began working in hotels and hospitals in Wyoming to support herself.

At age sixteen, Sutter lied about her age to join the US Navy Civilian Corps and was sent to Hawaii, where she enjoyed the welcoming, multicultural atmosphere even more than the weather. There, in about 1950, she married a sailor from Texas and for the next twenty years, Sutter lived in the white world, moving frequently while her husband worked first on the rodeo circuit and then in the booming oil industry. She continued to work while raising three children; her favorite job was running a café in Montana. After she had completed nursing school in Texas in 1969, her Arapaho father called her to come to Wind River, and she returned, hoping for healing and learning. Her

father wasn't specific about what she should do, but she found many opportunities there: working in health care, starting a reservation grocery store, and going back to school to learn how to establish more effective programs to help her people. She eventually earned four degrees while working for various Indian organizations. During these years she divorced her first alcoholic husband, married and divorced a second one, and welcomed several grandchildren. Some tribal elders encouraged her to run for the Northern Arapaho Business Council, and she eventually chaired it, but she disliked the contentiousness of tribal politics. The elders agreed she had done what they had asked and gave her permission to continue her career in tribal administration with other Indian nations. She continues to return to Wind River every year for the Sun Dance, sometimes accompanied by her own great-grandchildren.

In contrast, Sutter had few specific biographical details to use to reconstruct the life of Goes In Lodge, who died in 1876, just two years before the Northern Arapaho were settled with their historical enemies, the Shoshone, on the Wind River Reservation. As a young widow with two small daughters, Goes In Lodge became the first wife of noted warrior Sharp Nose, later a scout and a chief. She bore him another daughter, Caroline, whose youngest son became Sutter's father. In chapters focused on different phases of her great-grandmother's life, Sutter included brief accounts of a few notable historical events: the Fort Laramie treaty gathering and the Sand Creek massacre. Mostly she recounts general information about Arapaho origins, beliefs about animals, Sun Dance and sweat lodge practices, children's games, puberty and marriage customs, childbirth, age-graded societies and ceremonies, and an extended visit to a village of Gros Ventre allies. My favorite Goes in Lodge chapter was her last, in which she described her own death and burial, movingly illustrating Arapaho beliefs.

The author states that she gathered some of her historical and cultural information for the Goes in Lodge portion of the book from Arapaho and Cheyenne elders thanked in her acknowledgments. However, other unacknowledged material originated in written sources, at least one of which Sutter failed to cite. In chapter 3, Goes In Lodge's tale contained several passages only slightly paraphrased from Truman Michelson's as-told-to life history article, "Narrative of an Arapaho Woman" (1933; reprinted in its entirety in *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology*, 1994, 343–52). This work was not included in Sutter's brief list of suggested readings, nor was it cited in her text, as a few direct quotes from other primary sources were. The paraphrasing was entirely too close to be coincidental. Michelson in Krupat (344–45) states:

We always played games that were common among the tribes associated with the Arapaho, such as packing one another upside down, swimming across rivers on the back with one foot sticking above the water with a ball of mud on the big toe which represented a grandchild. We had to swim feet first, and swim straight across regardless of the speed or current of the stream. Then we would line up and see who could dive and swim under water the longest and farthest without taking a breath, or coming above the water level.

Sutter (35) says:

Common among the Arapaho children were games such as carrying one another upside down and swimming across the river on our backs with one foot sticking above the water with a ball of mud on the big toe, which represented a grandchild. You had to swim feet-first and swim straight across, regardless of the speed of the current. Then you would line up to see who could dive in and swim under water the longest and farthest.

Perhaps because Michelson had preserved his informant's words without identifying her as an individual led Sutter to assume that she could incorporate this anonymous woman into the composite character she created as Goes In Lodge. I am not certain how fully the conventions of historical scholarship must be followed in portions of a book that could be classified as creative nonfiction, but I found the lack of footnotes for clearly borrowed material problematic.

Since both Virginia Sutter and Goes in Lodge lived in times of tumultuous change for their people, their stories are compelling, and the book ably fulfills the author's main intention, to provide "a better understanding of our Arapaho culture and traditions" (2). The book brought to mind other recent works highlighting intergenerational connections among Plains Indian women. Alma Hogan Snell's *Grandmother's Grandchild: My Crow Indian Life*, edited by Becky Matthews (2000), complements her grandmother's own as-told-to autobiography, Frank Linderman's classic *Pretty-Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (1932). Read together, these books provide a unique sequence of first-person perspectives within a single family. In *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter* (2002), Lakota Delphine Red Shirt retells stories her mother, Lone Woman, told about her own life and that of Red Shirt's great-grandmother in a beautifully written narrative rich with linguistic as well as cultural detail. These books highlight very traditional full-blood families whose intergenerational linkages and connections to their Native lifeways are direct and clear. In contrast, Sutter lived most of her life in the context of the white portion of her mixed heritage. Since she experienced only intermittent contact with her Arapaho family, her ties to her tribal culture were far more tenuous, and she strained to create her great-grandmother as a traditional Arapaho everywoman. By achieving her second objective in this book, "to help my family learn more of those relatives who struggled for survival during the 1800s" (1), Sutter also provides a model for people like herself, who struggle to reconnect with their Native heritage, and the book will interest all who seek to understand this process. Its major flaw—inadequate citations—will probably worry scholars more than other readers, but remains troubling. I hope that the author will write an addendum, explaining how she created Goes In Lodge and listing all her sources. I urge the publisher to include this in unsold copies and to print a new edition that includes this important material.

Anonymous