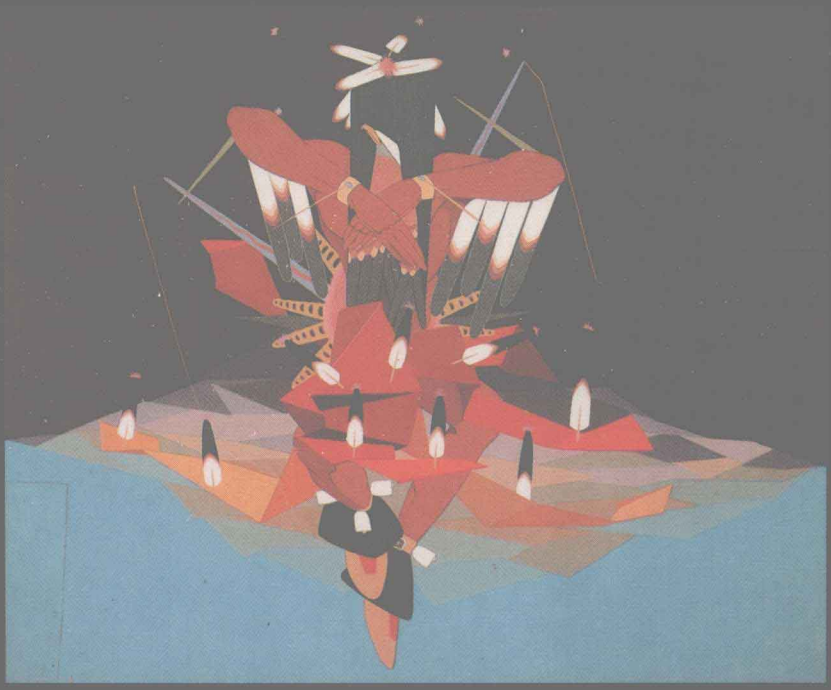
AMERICAN INDIAN LIFE

Edited by Elsie Clews Parsons

Introduction to the Bison Book Edition by Joan Mark



American Indian Life

EDITED BY ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS
ILLUSTRATED BY C. GRANT LAFARGE

Introduction to the Bison Book Edition
by Joan Mark

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London

Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing of the second Bison Book edition: 1991
Most recent printing indicated by the last digit below:
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
American Indian life / edited by Elsie Clews Parsons; illustrated by
C. Grant La Farge: introduction to the Bison book edition by Joan Mark.
p. cm.
"A Bison book."
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8032-8728-3 (pbk.)
1. Indians of North America—Legends. 2. Indians of North
America—Social life and customs. I. Parsons, Elsie Worthington
Clews, 1875–1941.
E98.F6A46 1991
398.2'08997—dc20
91-16847
CIP

Reprinted from the 1922 edition published by B. W. Huebsch, Inc.

AMERICAN INDIAN LIFE

Introduction to the Bison Book Edition
by Joan Mark

This is an amazing book, a collection of short fictional stories about American Indian life that are as vivid and convincing today as when they were first published seventy years ago. To us, reading them near the end of the twentieth century, they open a window not only on how indigenous peoples of the Americas lived before the coming of the Europeans but also on American anthropology of the 1920s. Here we catch a glimpse of what that small but significant group of people who called themselves anthropologists were doing and what they considered important as they went about studying American Indians.

Elsie Clews Parsons asked many of her colleagues to contribute to this book, and they could all do so because they were nearly all specialists in the American Indians. That is the first important characteristic of American anthropology in the 1920s. Research was focused almost exclusively on Native Americans. Margaret Mead would soon be the anomaly. Still an undergraduate at Barnard College when this collection was put together, she would, in a few years, insist on going to Samoa for her first field work, saying that she wanted to study a functioning culture and not another dying American Indian group. But nearly everyone else studied American Indians, not only because they were geographically so near, but precisely because they were thought to be dying out, not as individuals but as societies. It was urgent to record as many of the old ways as possible before the last instance or even the last memory of them disappeared completely. The reason it was considered urgent was that cultures represent alternate social arrangements from which we might learn something as well as clusters of irreplaceable historical data. For a culture to die out unrecorded, to become extinct, was analogous to a biological species becoming extinct. In each case it meant an irreparable loss of

diversity and of scientific information. Among anthropologists, only a very few, like the Omaha Indian Francis La Flesche (not included in this volume), thought of their work primarily as preserving *for Indian peoples* a record of their past. Most anthropologists wrote for one another, and in an occasional volume such as this one, for the general public, hoping to contribute to cross-cultural understanding. Anthropologists did not compile their monographs to benefit the people they were studying, although these splendid ethnographies did prove in many cases to be useful to latter-day Native Americans, a happy if inadvertent by-product.

The second important characteristic of American anthropology in the 1920s and preceding decades is that it was "salvage" anthropology. It was an attempt to salvage what was left of the old ways before they disappeared completely. Anthropologists wanted to describe, not the impact of Europeans on Native Americans, for that was a sordid tale, but how Native Americans had lived on the North American continent before the Europeans arrived. Most of these stories are set in the time just before contact with incoming Europeans; in a few there are intimations of what is soon to come. Few of the societies described here were still functioning in 1920 in anything like the old way. Most American Indian peoples had long since been conquered militarily or pushed onto reservations or been forcibly assimilated, their children taken away to school and forbidden to speak their native language and their religion driven underground. When anthropologists went into the "field" to study an American Indian group, they did not sit all day in the center of an Indian encampment or village and record what was going on. They went to a reservation and looked for an "informant," usually an elderly person who remembered the old ways or knew the old ceremonies and was willing to describe them, often for an hourly wage. From the painstaking recording of texts and cultural descriptions thus gleaned, and often supplemented by archaeological and historical evidence, the anthropologist would piece together a description of what the culture had once been: its material culture, kinship system, tribal government, religious ceremonies. The relative stress

on religious beliefs and ceremonies in these stories and the lack of emphasis on more down-to-earth topics (as well as the lack of humor) may be, as Alfred Kroeber acknowledges in his Introduction, owing to the circumstances in which the information was collected.

A third characteristic of American anthropology in the 1920s, and the source of the remarkable unity in this volume, is that many of the people then active in anthropology were either students or close associates of Franz Boas. Franz Boas immigrated from Germany in the 1880s and by 1899 had become established as a professor of anthropology at Columbia University and a dominant figure in the field. Boas himself contributed one story to this volume, "An Eskimo Winter." Among the other authors, A. A. Goldenweiser, P. E. Goddard, M. R. Harrington, A. L. Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Truman Michelson, Paul Radin, Edward Sapir, Frank Speck, Leslie Spier, John R. Swanton, T. T. Waterman, and Clark Wissler were all his students, and J. Alden Mason was a student of Boas's students Kroeber and Sapir. Elsie Clews Parsons, the editor of the volume, was not formally a Boas student. She had earned a Ph.D. in sociology and written several books on marriage and the family before she turned to anthropology in her mid-forties. Once she had discovered anthropology, however, she gave up her speculative, popular writing style in favor of the meticulous scientific recording of cultural data that Boas encouraged and became a close associate and patron of Boas, occasionally providing funding for field trips by his students and generally supporting his style of anthropology. All told, twenty of the twenty-seven stories in this book can be clearly identified with Boasian anthropology.

Elsie Clews Parsons's contributions hint at her strong feminism, and a number of the stories in this book have, appropriately, a woman as the central character. Yet Parsons herself is the only female author in this collection, probably because of the scarcity of women in anthropology in her generation. Several well-known women, including Alice Fletcher, Mathilda Coxe Stevenson, Erminnie Smith, and Zelia Nuttall, were active in anthropology in the United States between 1880 and 1912. Ruth Benedict, Marga-

ret Mead, Ruth Bunzel, Gladys Reichard, and others among Boas's students—along with Hortense Powdermaker, who had studied with Malinowski in England—would begin to come to prominence in the United States in the late 1920s. But for fifteen years, between 1912 and 1927, Parsons stood virtually alone. The explanation offered by Margaret Rossiter in *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* is that as anthropology and other sciences became professionalized at the turn of the century and a Ph.D. degree was increasingly a requirement, women were squeezed out.[1] Elsie Clews Parsons recognized this situation; she and Franz Boas would be among the people most responsible for remedying it in the 1920s.

In content as well as contributors, *American Indian Life* can be readily recognized as a product of the Boas school. Parsons's goal was to produce a book for the general reader that would picture the many different life-ways of the first inhabitants of the North American continent. The geographical range is vast, from the Baffinland Eskimos in the North to the Mayas of the Yucatan peninsula, from the Shellmound people along the California coast to the Delawares and Creeks on the Atlantic coast. But Elsie Clews Parsons and the other authors wanted to do more than show how skillfully Indian societies had adapted themselves to the highly diverse environments that they found on the North American continent. They wanted to show not only how Indians lived but, more important in their view, how they thought. This was crucial to Boasian anthropology. To Parsons and her colleagues, the environment did not determine the culture. It only set the outer parameters, the limits, on what was possible. What shaped a people's distinctive way of life was, rather, a combination of inherited customs, chance influences, and occasional new inventions. This raw stuff of social life was melded by a society over time into a powerful whole, called culture or social custom, which shaped the life—and the thinking—of every individual in it from birth to death. The aim of these stories was to show what constituted social custom in each of the societies described, what was considered in each of them the "right" way to behave.

Behind these twenty-seven stories lay a twofold message. Elsie

Clews Parsons and the other authors wanted to arouse in their readers an appreciative interest in the American Indians and to show why they behave and think as they do. Implicitly they were battling against both racist tendencies to see American Indians as innately inferior to Europeans and the social evolutionists of the mid- and late-nineteenth century who placed the American Indians at a lower rung on the ladder of social evolution.

At the same time, they wanted to demonstrate the power of social custom over everyone, including, implicitly, the members of the predominant American society, the audience for whom the book was intended. They described actions that appear irrational, even harmful, until the context and the reasoning behind them is understood, and even then we see the pain and harm that they can cause. Earth-tongue, a Mohave man, is commended by his people for killing a shaman whose attempted cures during a famine have not been successful. White-dog, a Crow warrior, forces himself to appear indifferent when his much loved wife is abducted and taken permanently as the wife of another, for this is a sign that he is a brave man and has a strong heart. The message of this book is that every society both supports the individuals born within it and at the same time exacts a toll on them. The message that cultural anthropology offered to Americans in the 1920s and 1930s was similar to the message offered by Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. Society traps us in irrationalities, just as our psyches trap us in irrationalities. The best we can do is try to understand the sources of the constraints we feel, for in understanding lies freedom.

Elsie Clews Parsons was a rebel. The daughter of a wealthy banker in New York City, she refused a debutante's life and insisted on attending Barnard College and then graduate school at Columbia. She was a pacifist during World War I and a lifelong feminist. At one point her advocacy of trial marriage threatened to sink the political career of her lawyer husband, Herbert Parsons, who was active in Republican politics and served for six years in the United States Congress. In 1919 she lectured on anthropology at the New School for Social Research, where Ruth Benedict was one of her students.[2] In anthropology Parsons

found a way to explain the conventions and conformity which she detested and against which she struggled. She was one of the first anthropologists to be interested in the individual: the individual who thinks, who absorbs variously the teachings of a culture, who chooses whether to go along or to rebel. She was one of the first to see that the relation of the individual to the culture was a problem that anthropology ought to tackle.

Parsons's way of tackling this problem was to ask her fellow anthropologists to write fictions, stories about individuals, in which they were free to speculate about how an individual would think or feel in a particular situation. They could attribute motives, feelings, and values to their characters, all matters that are hard to describe in strictly scientific terms. It is conceivable that almost no one other than Elsie Clews Parsons could have succeeded with this project, for she was pushing Boasian anthropology beyond where it had yet gone. Parsons was enough of an outsider, however, and with sufficient status in her own right, to be able to propose a seemingly questionable genre, a popular book of fictions about American Indians, and have her fellow anthropologists join in enthusiastically. At the time, most of them probably thought of it, as Kroeber did, as a way of making use of insights they could not find a place for in their regular work.

The master of the genre, rather surprisingly, turns out to be Robert H. Lowie. Lowie was a cautious empiricist with standards of scholarship so rigorous that he usually could not even satisfy them himself. A colleague remembered Lowie's seminars at the University of California at Berkeley as "a curious interaction in which both professor and students were afraid that they would be found wanting."[3] But in writing these fictions Lowie was freed to use his imagination, to create out of the wealth of his knowledge convincing instances of what might have been, and he obviously reveled in the task, in shaping a story, and giving it an ironic twist at the end. Lowie's stories are small gems, works of literary art, as the editor obviously recognized in placing Lowie's stories first and including four of them, compared to one each for the other contributors.

American Indian Life might be said to mark the beginning of the

coming together of anthropology and psychology that would be so significant in the 1930s. Edward Sapir and Alfred Kroeber were already interested in psychoanalysis. In the early 1920s Kroeber practiced for a time as a lay analyst in San Francisco. Sapir joined the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan in a series of interdisciplinary conferences in the late 1920s and wrote several seminal papers in the 1920s and 1930s that led to the subdiscipline of culture-and-personality, also called psychological anthropology. Margaret Mead was soon to test in Samoa G. Stanley Hall's hypothesis that adolescence was inevitably a tempestuous period and to study child rearing in Bali. But the most direct descendant of *American Indian Life* was Ruth Benedict's famous *Patterns of Culture* (1934). Benedict's concerns were also those of Parsons: the diversity of cultures, the constraining power of culture, and the problem of the deviant individual, but she built a much more speculative edifice on Parsons's cautious foundation, with her depictions of "megalomaniac" Kwakiutls, "Apollonian" Zunis, and "paranoid" Melanesian Dobus.

NOTES

1. Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,* 1982), p. xvii.

2. Paul S. Boyer, "Elsie Clews Parsons, 1875–1941," in *Notable American Women,* Edward T. James and Janet W. James, eds., Vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 20–22.

3. Robert F. Murphy, *Robert H. Lowie* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 5.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Preface

"SHE always says she will come, and sometimes she comes and sometimes she doesn't come. I was so surprised when I first came out here to find that Indians were like that," the wife of the Presbyterian Missionary in an Indian town in New Mexico was speaking, as you readily infer, on her servant question.

"Where did you get your impressions of Indians before you came here?"

"From Fenimore Cooper. I used to take his books out, one right after the other from the library at New Canaan, Connecticut, where I grew up."

At that time, during the youth of this New Englander past middle age, few anthropological monographs on Indian tribes had been written, but it is doubtful if such publications are to be found in New England village libraries even to-day, and it is more than doubtful that if they were in the libraries anybody would read them; anthropologists themselves have been known not to read them. Between these forbidding monographs and the legends of Fenimore Cooper, what is there then to read for a girl who is going to spend her life among Indians or, in fact, for anyone who just wants to know more about Indians?

From these considerations, among others, this book was conceived. The idea of writing about the life of the Indian for the General Reader is not novel, to be sure, to anthropologists. Appearances to the contrary, anthropologists have no wish to keep their science or any part of it esoteric. They are too well aware, for one thing, that facilities for the pursuit of anthropology are dependent more or less on popular interest, and that only too often tribal cultures have disappeared in America as elsewhere before people became interested enough in them to learn about them.

Nevertheless, the cost of becoming popular may appear excessive —not only to the student who begrudges the time and energy that must be drawn from scientific work, but to the scientist who is asked

to popularize his study in terms repugnant to his sense of truth or propriety. Hitherto, American publishers appear to have proposed only to bring Fenimore Cooper up to date, merely to add to the over-abundant lore of the white man about the Indian.

In this book the white man's traditions about Indians have been disregarded. That the writers have not read other traditions from their own culture into the culture they are describing is less certain. Try as we may, and it must be confessed that many of us do not try very hard, few, if any of us, succeed, in describing another culture, of ridding ourselves of our own cultural bias or habits of mind. Much of our anthropological work, to quote from a letter from Spinden, "is not so much definitive science as it is a cultural trait of ourselves."

For one thing we fail to see the foreign culture as a whole, noting only the aspects which happen to interest us. Commonly, the interesting aspects are those which differ markedly from our own culture or those in which we see relations to the other foreign cultures we have studied. Hence our classified data give the impression that the native life is one unbroken round, let us say, of curing or weather-control ceremonials, of prophylaxis against bad luck, of hunting, or of war. The commonplaces of behavior are overlooked, the amount of "common sense" is underrated, and the proportion of knowledge to credulity is greatly underestimated. In other words the impression we give of the daily life of the people may be quite misleading, somewhat as if we described our own society in terms of Christmas and the Fourth of July, of beliefs about the new moon or ground hogs in February, of city streets in blizzards and after, of strikes and battleships. Unfortunately, the necessarily impressionistic character of the following tales, together with their brevity, renders them, too, subject to the foregoing criticism. Of this, Dr. Kroeber in the Introduction will have more to say, as well as of his impression of how far we have succeeded in presenting the psychological aspects of Indian culture.

The problems presented by the culture, problems of historical reconstruction, Dr. Kroeber will also refer to, but discussion of the problems, of such subjects as culture areas, as the current phrase goes, as diffusion and acculturation, will not be presented in this

book—it is a book of pictures. But if the reader wants to learn of how the problems are being followed up, he is directed to the bibliographical notes in the appendix. If the pictures remain pictures for him, well and good; if they lead him to the problems, good and better. Anthropology is short on students.

E. C. P.