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OKLAHOMA--AN INDIAN LABORATORY

By STANLEY VESTAL

HE University of Oklahoma has a unique opportunity for the study of the American Indian. More than thirty tribes can be found within the State. Nowhere on this continent is there a better laboratory for the study of the native race. Here in Oklahoma the historian, the ethnologist, the anthropologist have an opportunity to be matched elsewhere. The administration of the university is well aware of this fact, and President Bizzell is doing all he can to encourage work in this field. It is to be expected that many of the alumni and faculty will do work of this kind in the future and therefore I have been asked to give a brief account of the methods and results of such work based upon my own experience in doing research among certain Indians of the Plains tribes, particularly the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Sioux. I am glad to do this in the hope that my experience may be of value to others in this great, rich field.

Early investigators were hampered by poor interpreters, by the reluctance of the Indians to talk, and by the lack of any background of science or history of the West by which to check results. These disadvantages are no longer insurmountable.

For research among the Indians one requires a staff consisting of an investigator, an interpreter, a stenographer, and of course an informant.

The investigator must be first of all a good listener. Generally speaking, he will have better luck if he is old enough to show a few grey hairs. It is all the better if he has been a soldier, for Plains Indians have little respect for mere civilians. It is well also if he knows something of Indian customs and etiquette so as to avoid offense. Old-time Indians are very courteous and dislike those who do not observe their conventions. Needless to say, the investigator should be one who likes Indians and respects them.

The stenographer should be one who can take notes rapidly and unobtrusively, a quiet, efficient, and energetic person. Some people try to get along without stenographers, but a man cannot do his best work in research with his nose in a notebook.

The interpreter is the most difficult member of the staff to find. Some of them are out of sympathy with the older Indians. Some of them will supply from their own information the answers to one's questions. Some of them will even make up stories rather than take the trouble to repeat what the old men say. And of course there are factions and families and groups among Indians, as among other people, which erect barriers and cause suspicion and dislike.

It is well to know of these things in advance, since no interpreter, however well he knows the languages, is of any use unless he has the confidence of your informant. It is well to have several interpreters on your string and to use each one where he will do the most good. The most difficult are sometimes jealous of each other.

The informant of course must be a man who has information to give and is willing to give it. More than that, he should be one with a good memory and a reputation for honesty and courage. Not every old Indian has all these qualities, and if one gathers data from some disreputable man, it is likely that men of better character will refuse to talk. For this reason a good introduction is absolutely essential. No one in his senses will discuss his private history with the first stranger he meets, and unless one can take time to make friends slowly over a period of years, one must have the right introduction. Even so, there will be some topics on which old Indians will prefer not to talk.

I have found it best to make presents rather than payments to old Indians. Many of them have no conception of the value of money. A pair of buffalo horns, a box of the right brand of tobacco, a pony or some eagle feathers will win more good will as a rule than an equal value in currency. On one occasion I delighted an old man by presenting him with an owl, knowing that he valued the feathers.

It is usually necessary also to convince your informant of your sincerity and to give him some idea of the use which you intend to make of the information he gives you. The Indians have been cheated and betrayed so often that they are suspicious. Another difficulty is their courtesy, which makes them wish to please you and tell you what you wish to know. For this reason one should never ask a leading question. Never suggest what answer you expect. Their habitual courtesy also makes them feel that any interruption is an affront. Old men like to talk and sometimes leave the subject altogether, but it will never do to interrupt them. Sit and listen, and perhaps the old man will hit upon something far more interesting than what you were after. It is well also to take advantage of a man's momentary interest. Thus while I was gathering material for a life of Sitting Bull I learned a great deal about his horses owing to the fact that one of his relatives, an old man of seventy-six years had just won a horse race and was babbling over with enthusiasm on that subject at the time.

Some people may question the value of information acquired in this way, and of course in research of any kind everything has to be verified. It is well to check one's interpreter in order to make sure no error has crept into the story. This can be done by the use of the sign language, by acquiring a smattering of the Indian language, and by discussing the same matter with different men through interpreters. Following this method excellent results can be obtained. In fact, I think one may rely more on such interviews with old-time Indians than upon most of our printed histories, for the Indians very seldom deal in hearsay. They will tell you only what they themselves saw and heard. If white historians were half so guarded in their statements some of them would have to go out of business. After all a book is only a man talking and very often talking through his hat. During an interview one may be sure of the honesty, capacity and knowledge of an informant, but when we read we listen in the dark. The one weakness in Indian information lies in the matter of chronology. The Indian has no means of recording the day of the week or the month when something happened, but with the aid of the white man's records one can generally check up these inaccuracies.

So much for the methods I have used and for the results to be obtained. The real reward of research among old-time Indians lies in the contacts made with those old warriors who have survived so much and who still maintain their code of primitive virtue. When they were young they lived in a virile world which has left its stamp upon them. Their was a good life, and the echo of it is pleasant to ears which are a little tired of the saxophone. To make friends with such men and to get glimpses of their character and standards is in itself an experience well worth the effort and expense of research, even if you gain nothing else.