

What the Lens Captures: Women and Indigenous Photography in the Late Nineteenth and
Early Twentieth Centuries

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Lee E. Berryhill

Major Professor: Matthew Fox-Amato, Ph.D.

Committee Members: Adam Sowards, Ph.D.; Rebecca Scofield, Ph.D.

Department Administrator: Ellen Kittell, Ph.D.

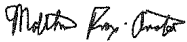
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Authorization to Submit Thesis

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

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Major Professor:  Date: 5/10/21


Matthew Fox-Amato, Ph.D.

Committee Members:  Date: 5/10/21

Adam Sowards, Ph.D.

Committee Member  Date: 5/10/21

Rebecca Scofield, Ph.D.

Department Administrator:  Date: 5/11/2021

Ellen Kittell, Ph.D.

Abstract

It is well known that by the turn of the century, male photographers, such as Edward S. Curtis were taking documentary photography of what they considered a vanishing race. However, this is only part of the story of Indigenous photography. White women also participated in photography: Some as a hobby and others professionally. Photography was not exclusive to Euro-Americans either, but a way in which Indigenous people photographed themselves and their communities. Far from disappearing, Indigenous people resiliently survived, and utilized photography in their own way. Rather than photographs illustrating a disappearing act, Indigenous photography depicts autonomy and strength. It was not all men either who took up a camera to capture Indigenous sitters. White women also played a role in the history of photography and Indigenous photographs. Even Indigenous women themselves took photographs and experimented with photography.

This thesis offers an analysis of photographs of Indigenous people taken by three women photographers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this study I investigate the way two white women portrayed and interacted with Indigenous communities through photography, and how an Indigenous woman utilized photography to capture her own Indigenous community. The primary sources of investigation are photographs taken in the 1890s and 1900s created by the three women photographers of Indigenous peoples, landscapes, buildings, and Euro-Americans in Idaho and a rural community of Cherokee in Oklahoma. By arguing that these photographs stand as evidence of Indigenous knowledge of and interaction with photography and women's participation in photographing Indigenous peoples, I demonstrate that photographs of

Indigenous by women and by Indigenous women are taken for reasons that differ from not only each other, but also their male contemporaries.

This thesis is organized around three case studies of women photographers that took photographs of Indigenous peoples. Benedicte Wrensted, a white woman from Pocatello, Idaho who took some of the only known nineteenth century photographs of Shoshone-Bannock, was a professional with her own studio. She illustrates a white woman making photography her career, and photographing Indigenous people, because they were her clients. E. Jane Gay, another white woman who photographed the Nez Perce while the Dawes Allotment Act (1877) was being implemented with an agenda toward assimilation policy. Finally, Jennie Ross Cobb, a Cherokee woman from Oklahoma who took amateur photographs of her Cherokee community with no government agenda or paying clients to influence her photography. Their photographs allow for a look at how women photographers both white and Indigenous participated in producing photographs of Indigenous people and how their photography connects to the larger scope of scholarship within visual history.

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I would like to thank my Major Professor, Dr. Matthew Fox-Amato, and my committee members Dr. Adam Sowards and Dr. Rebecca Scofield, as well as Dr. Ellen Kittell for their time, support, ideas, and encouragement in helping me create this thesis and succeeding in graduate school.

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Introduction

E. Jane Gay, photographer, cook, and maid followed Alice C. Fletcher through Nez Perce territory photographing assimilation and the progress of the Dawes Act. Her photographs show an important moment in Euro-American and Indigenous history. Benedicte Wrensted, perhaps had similar thoughts as Gay upon settling in Pocatello, Idaho. She was one of the only photographers of the late nineteenth century to photograph the Shoshone Bannock Nation living at the Fort Hall Reservation. Jennie Ross Cobb perhaps had feelings of connections to her Cherokee Nation hometown in Oklahoma, as her photographs capture her life there. She was an Indigenous woman taking photographs of Indigenous people in the early twentieth century.

These women photographers, left behind an archive of photographs – images made during a transformation period in Indigenous history. Two important events had taken place in 1877 before E. Jane Gay took her photographs. The first was the Nez Perce Wars. The Nez Perce had been able to control their land and resist settler intrusion until the 1860s when gold was found in the northern Rocky Mountains. Treaties were created only to be broken. Two battles and several skirmishes were ultimately fought, but the Nez Perce would be overwhelmed and were forced to surrender with a young Chief Joseph stating, “From where the sun now stands I will fight no more.” The Nez Perce were then sent from their homelands to a reservation in Lapwai, Idaho.¹ The other event was the policy called the Dawes Allotment Act, which came into effect in 1877 after being pushed through Congress by Senator Henry Dawes. The Allotment Act forced tribes to accept privatized land allotments to start their own farms and ranches. In the end what the act did was reduce Indigenous land. In the midst of the

¹ Elliot West. *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. xv-xvi.

implementing of this act Gay took her photographs. Her images capture Fletcher dividing and reducing Indigenous land.

Benedicte Wrensted took photographs of the Shoshone Bannock who resided on the Fort Hall Reservation. Through treaties signed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between Indigenous peoples and the United States government, Indigenous peoples' land was reduced and Indigenous peoples were forced to relocate. In 1830 Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which would force Indigenous peoples west of the Mississippi to relocate to Indian Territory or present day Oklahoma. With the excuse of Manifest Destiny, Euro-Americans traveled west infringing upon Indigenous land, and in 1851 the Appropriations Act was authorized to move Indigenous peoples onto even smaller parcels of land called reservations. The United States government promised to support the relocated tribes with food and other supplies, but their commitments often went unfulfilled.² Through the Dawes Allotment Act, the Shoshone Bannock were allotted the Fort Hall Reservation.

Jennie Ross Cobb made photographs in the context of forced education and Cherokee resistance, and what makes this important to the Cherokee was that their schools belonged to them rather than the government or a religious organization both of which had started to fund Indigenous boarding schools. Richard Henry Pratt in 1879 started the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Students were forbidden to speak their own native languages, wear their native clothing, and they were even given English names to replace their native ones. Pratt ran the institute in a military fashion and abuse was common and diseases ran rampant. In ten years, twenty more schools run by the Office of Indian Affairs were opened.³ In a time when Indigenous children were being removed from their families

² Sarah K. Elliot. "How American Indian Reservations Came to Be." *PBS*. 2015.

³ David Treuer. *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*. (New York, Riverhead Books, 2019) pp. 135-6.

and cultures, the Cherokee resisted and built their own educational system. Cobb's photographs depict the buildings in which this resistance took place.

Women began using cameras and participated in photography from the very beginning. Analyzing women photographers is important, because their photography differed from male photographers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, photography allowed women an acceptable career: A way for a woman to work and be the head of her own household. Men had many options of careers, women did not, and photography was one that a woman could have and could be successful at. Photography also allowed women agency. It allowed women the opportunity to travel, attend schools for photography, and write their own narratives with their images. These narratives differ from the ones men created. Through women's photography their narrative of Indigenous assimilation and allotment can be seen. White women pushed agendas, with photography.⁴

Scholars such as, Barry Pritzker, and Shamoan Zamir have written extensively on Edward S. Curtis, and the photographs Curtis thought would portray a vanishing race. Pritzker's book *Edward S. Curtis* focuses on the artistic nature and scope of Curtis' photographs, and how they shaped and influences public opinion. He argues that Curtis' photographs influenced the public to believe Indigenous peoples would disappear. Zamir's book *The Gift of Face: Portraiture and Time in Edward S. Curtis's American Indian* focuses on how Indigenous peoples in Curtis' images are coauthors in his art, and that his photography portrays their fading culture not a vanishing race. Scholars have focused their

⁴ Scholarship of empire, and culture includes, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

study on Curtis and his work in different ways, even with Indigenous agency in mind, but women photographers are not included in the scholarship.⁵

Historian Martha Sandweiss has raised the question of agency and shown that Indigenous people were not simply victims. My thesis is building off this argument by showing how white women and Indigenous women photographed Indigenous peoples and communities around them, and in doing so have left a remarkable supply of visual culture that illuminates Indigenous agency in their photography. By critically analyzing the photography of Benedicte Wrensted, E. Jane Gay, and Jennie Ross Cobb I argue the images will further an understanding of Indigenous photographs and Indigenous agency with and through photography to create their own images and dialogue within the visual culture of the west.

To analysis these photographs, I looked at many different layers. Two of these layers were production and circulation. Wrensted produced her photographs in a professional studio. Her clients would pay for their photographs, she would touch them up, and then return them to the clients. There is no evidence that she sold her Indigenous photographs as postcards or to a government agency. Gay produced her photographs in the field, and while there is no evidence she sold her photographs, she did send them back East to Senator Dawes as proof for his allotment act. There is no evidence that Cobb sold her photographs at all, but one can

⁵ Scholars of photographs of Indigenous people include, America Meredith. "Jennie Ross Cobb: Cherokee Female Seminary Graduating Class, 1902." *The Hearts of Our People*. (University of Washington Press, 2019); Barry Pritzker *Edward S. Curtis* (New York: Crescent Books, 1993); Carol J. Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006); Laura E. Smith, *Horace Poolaw, Photographer of American Indian Modernity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Martha Sandweiss. *Print the Legend*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002); Morgan F. Bell. "Some Thoughts On 'Taking' Pictures: Imagining 'Indians' and the Counter-Narratives of Visual Sovereignty." *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2011; Nicole Dawn Strathman. "Through Native Lenses: American Indian Vernacular Photographies and Performances of Memories, 1890-1940." *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. 2013; Nicole Tonkovich. *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Shamoan Zamir, *The Gift of the Face: Portraiture and time in Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 2014); Susan Bernardin, *Trading Gazes: Euro-American women Photographers and Native North Americans, 1880-1940* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

speculate that she gave them as keepsakes to family and friends. Another layer of the photographs I analyzed was the clothing. Was the Euro-American and Indigenous? Was the outfit formal or everyday wear? What does the clothing say about the person in the images? I also looked at the objects in the photographs, and how they contributed to the images' narrative, such as landscapes, props, or buildings. Finally, I considered the occasion in which the photographers was creating the image, such Gay taking the images during the allotment policy or Cobb during a period of forced boarding school education.

This thesis contributes to the conversation about photography and Euro-Indigenous relations by showing the ways in which both white women and Indigenous women photographers participated in photographs of Indigenous people by showcasing Indigenous agency in and with photographs through the three case studies. This thesis shows how Indigenous peoples sought to self-represent in a white studio by choosing to have their photographs taken and in what clothing and poses they would place themselves in. Even when photographs are being used by the government to further domination policies, such as the Dawes Act, Indigenous peoples still made their own meanings from the photographs by showing strength and resilience that modern generations now visualize in the images. Lastly, this thesis shows how an Indigenous photographer used photography for her own purposes to capture her life and community as an Indigenous person.

Chapter One

Benedicte Wrensted Arrives

The Fort Hall Reservation was created in 1867 with the treaty of Fort Bridger, and in 1887 became the home of the Northern Shoshone and Bannock Indians with the Dawes Act. Fort Hall was made up of 4,500 residents and 1.8 million acres at this time. In 1882 somewhere around sixteen hundred Indigenous peoples lived at Fort Hall. The Indigenous residents sold land first to the railroad in 1881 then again in 1887. Each member of the tribe received a certain share of land. Married couples received 160 acres, single adults 80 acres, and children 40 acres.⁶ The excess land was sold by the government to non-Indigenous ranchers and farmers. This created a construction boom, and by 1889 Pocatello was officially incorporated into Bingham County. In 1889 the town had five hundred residents, and by 1895 had around forty-five hundred non-Indigenous residents. In 1900, five years after Benedicte Wrensted arrived, 4,044 residents of Euro-American descent were listed in the town census.⁷

Relationships between the Shoshone Bannock and the Euro-Americans were complicated, especially relations with the Indian Agency. The Shoshone Bannock sought autonomy, while also being upset with the agency for slighting their district economically through development and land distribution. Agents saw the Shoshone Bannock as both “backward” and self-sufficient. This was due to the Shoshone Bannock’s economic success due to connections with Euro-American ranchers and nearby Pocatello. The Shoshone Bannock sold the wild hay they cultivated to ranchers, and this gave them money to purchase machinery to augment their productive capacity. Others worked subsistence farms or worked

⁶ Natalie Larson. Brigham Young University. intermountianhistory.org. 2020.

⁷ Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) pp. 65.

off the reservation to supplement their income. Complicating relations further were the high turn over rates of agents, and the lack of cultural understanding.⁸

It is within this context that Wrensted built her career and made her photography. Within her white studio, Indigenous people had their photographs taken for multiple reasons. One being conversion. The transition to Christianity and Euro-American culture is shown through Wrensted's Indigenous photography. Another reason was to show pride in their Indigenous culture by choosing to dress in what at the time Euro-American's would call traditional Indigenous outfits when photographed. However, some of these photographs could be and would be exploited without the client's or photographer's consent and were used to construct Euro-American narratives, such as the myth of the "brave savage." While these photographs may have been exploited in the future, within Wrensted's time in Pocatello, Indigenous people asserted their agency through staged photography that differed from their Euro-American counterparts. Standing, full body poses instead of sitting or only half body poses illustrate how Indigenous people had their own way of posing for the camera.

Photography would allow Wrensted to have her own career, and she would begin taking photographs of the Shoshone Bannock when she became the new owner of a Pocatello photography studio, and in effect bought both the studio and gained the past photographer's clientele. Wrensted's first newspaper advertisement was in the *Pocatello Tribune* in 1895. It stated, "Miss Wrensted, Photographer, Hower's Old Stand, Cleveland Ave." Another advertisement states, "Photographs: I am prepared to Compete with all Comers in Workmanship, Artistic Finish and at Reasonable Prices. All Work Guaranteed. I am Here to Please and my Customers' Satisfaction is my aim. I am here to Stay, not for a few days, but to

⁸ John W. Heaton. *The Shoshone-Bannocks: Culture and Commerce at Fort Hall, 1870-1940*. (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2005) pp. 73-4.

remain with you. Patronize those who Patronize you./ Miss B. Wrensted.”⁹ It seems the *Pocatello Tribune* was generous in its ad exposure to Wrensted’s business, and it is possible her ads helped to sustain the newspaper. Wrensted’s studio was primarily a portrait studio, but at times she did photograph community events, such as the Pocatello High School graduation, the Pocatello Opera House fire, and parades.

Before moving to Pocatello Wrensted probably had little knowledge or contact with Indigenous peoples. However, it is safe to assume that through literature back in her native Denmark she would have become knowledgeable about the “noble savage” image, and the vanishing race idea. When she purchased Hower’s photography studio the assumption can be made, through her many photographs, that she took an interest in the Indigenous people of the Forth Hall Reservation.¹⁰

Her interest or at least growing knowledge can also be assumed by her travels in 1898 to the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. Here she would have witnessed the Indian Education Exhibit under the direction of Alice C. Fletcher. More than five hundred Indigenous peoples from seventy tribes also attended the event, and local photographers Frank A. Rinehart and Adolph F. Muhr took more than two hundred studio portraits of the Indigenous attendees for the Bureau of American Ethnology. The vanishing race myth would have been a common theme among these photographs. If Wrensted had visited Rinehart’s studio, she would have seen similarities to her own. The setup, including painted backgrounds, were much like hers back in Pocatello, and these photographs could

⁹ Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) pp. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 66.

have inspired her own photography of Indigenous peoples. These photographic exhibits most likely inspired Wrensted's own depictions of the Shoshone Bannock.¹¹

Once in Pocatello, Wrensted would most likely have met the Shoshone Bannock of Fort Hall through certain community members of Pocatello. Wives of Fort Hall Indian agents, and Presbyterian missionaries had close and at times friendly relations with the Shoshone and Bannock. These women knew Wrensted, and so Wrensted was connected with her Shoshone and Bannock clients. Some of her clients were past clients of Hower's, and likely because they were already comfortable having that studio take their photographs, evidenced by Hower's collection of Shoshone Bannock photographs, they continued to go to that studio even after the ownership changed hands.¹² By critically analyzing Wrensted's photography, I argue the images portray the agency of the Indigenous peoples captured in the photographs.

Benedicte Wrensted and Indigenous Photography

Wrensted's photography shows Indigenous people having their photographs taken as mementoes. Shoshone Bannock, Hubert Tetoby was one of Wrensted's clients. He was a Christian convert and active missionary. In one portrait photograph that is a close up of Tetoby from the waist up, his three-piece suit is clearly noticed. This could signify his participation in the world of Euro-Americans and his newfound Christian beliefs. Another photograph has Tetoby standing between two unknown subjects; this is not as close up of an image, and all three people while clearly Indigenous, are shown in Euro-American clothes. Tetoby and the other man are in three-piece suits, while the woman is in a dress and shawl. Tetoby was the only one standing, making him the center of the photograph. This makes

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 66.

¹² Ibid, pp. 66-7.

sense, as he autographed the back of this image, and sent it to a fellow Christian convert E.O. Leonard.¹³



Benedicte Wrensted, *Tetoby*, 1900, portrait, Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives, Eugene O. Leonard Collection, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/indian-photographs.htm>.

The desire to have photographs as mementoes is also demonstrated by Pat Tyhee who was another well-known Christian Bannock Wrensted photographed often. There were two photographs in her studio with the same painted background that had Tyhee seated. In one

¹³ Ibid, pp. 70-1.

photograph Tyhee was in Euro-American clothes, and a three-piece suit. He's seated on a wicker chair, his legs were crossed, and his hair was closely cropped. One arm rests on the chair arm, while the other rests on his leg. The other photograph had him sitting on a wooden chair. His hair was long, he was wearing moccasins, earrings and buckskin breeches: traditional Indigenous clothing. Both of his feet were touching the floor and his legs were slightly apart, while his arms are both resting on the arms of the chair.¹⁴



Benedicte Wrensted, *Pat Tyhee*, 1898-1899, portrait, Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives, Eugene O. Leonard Collection, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/indian-photographs.htm>.

A possible interpretation of this is, Tyhee's photographs rather than being interpreted as representing a forced conversion could show Tyhee's personal commitment to his new faith, giving Tyhee more agency in his decision to have these two images created. The photographs were pasted on similar cream-colored mounts, which could mean they were created around the same time. This means that when the photograph of Tyhee in traditional

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 72-5.

clothing was taken, he could already have converted. The captions also give a clue to the photographs' purpose. The one with "traditional" clothing reads, "Pat Tyhee before haircut and new suit," while the other reads, "Pat Tyhee just had a new suit of clothes and had his hair cut." The caption that goes with the two photographs at the Idaho State Historical Society reads, "Pat Tyhee, Photos taken the same day." These suggest that the photographs were not taken for a Euro-American agency that forced Tyhee to convert, but for Tyhee himself to show his conversion to Christianity.

Missionaries, government officials, and Indian agents often used dual photographs to show their conversion success. Missions were created to "civilize" Indigenous peoples by converting them to Christianity. Two examples include the San Buenaventura Mission, which was founded in 1782 in California and the Mission San Jose de Tumacacori founded by Jesuit Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in 1691 in Arizona. Manipulation to convert and forced conversions were common. However, some Indigenous peoples converted of their own free will, and used Christianity to defend Indigenous communities and strengthen Indigenous sovereignty. They did this by becoming spokespeople for their tribes. Others resisted conversion, and saw converts as betraying their tribes. By the nineteenth century, Christianity's influence on Indigenous people was great, and while some still resisted others were able to remain a part of their tribal community, advocate for their tribe, and convert to Christianity.¹⁵ The photograph of Tyhee represents his conversion, and also his Indigenous background, as he chose to convert to Christianity, but stayed a spokesperson for the tribe.

Martha Sandweiss has cautioned scholars to not assume Indigenous peoples were simply victims of photography, rather that they had personal choice and autonomy. Following

¹⁵ Joel W. Martin, Mark A. Nicholas, and Michelene E. Pesantubbee. *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press, 2010) pp. 1-3.

this framework the link between Tyhee and his conversion to a Euro-American lifestyle was a choice Tyhee himself could have made when he went to Wrensted's studio to have the two photographs taken. Tyhee could have wanted to memorialize his new lifestyle and religion. At the time, there were no personal or private cameras at the Fort Hall Reservation, so having an image that memorialized an event or life transition would had to have been taken in a studio. Tyhee just like a Euro-American may have wanted to capture this major transition in his life. While he may have started to dress in Euro-American clothes, throughout his life he was a spokesperson for the Shoshone Bannock, suggesting he never fully gave up his Indigenous identity.¹⁶

An example of an Indigenous person who chose to have his photograph taken rather than being a victim of photography is Billy George. He frequented Wrensted's studio, and sometime around 1895-96 she took a photo of him with his wife and children. Both Billy and his eldest son were wearing Euro-American suits and had short hair. Not only did the suits and short hair symbolize George's conversion to Christianity, but to Euro-American this also showed his modernity. This photograph challenges the mythos of the time that Indigenous peoples were backward and could not keep up with Euro-American's modern technologies, clothing, and ways of living. Here was George and his son wearing modern and popular men's clothing of the time.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 76

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 76-5.



Benedicte Wrensted, *Billy George and Family*, n/a, portrait, Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives, Eugene O. Leonard Collection, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/indian-photographs.htm>.

However, George's wife, Weetowsie, and youngest son are wearing "traditional" Indigenous clothing of long cloth dresses and moccasins. The cut of the wife's dress is not clear, but though made of cloth at this time, Indigenous women's dresses were often based off the traditional hide dresses. Those who remembered Weetowsie identified her only by a Shoshone name, perhaps suggesting that women were slower to adopt Euro-American

clothing and names. The blanket covering Weetowsie is not traditionally Shoshone, but rather Navajo, and was a prop used by Wrensted to showcase the sitters' Indigenous identity.¹⁸

The Edmo family is an example of Indigenous autonomy in photography. They were the most photographed of Wrensted's Indigenous clients. They were prominent on the Fort Hall Reservation, and about ten percent of Wrensted's Indigenous photographs are of the Edmos. Jack Edmo and his family can be seen in photographs again and again. Jack Edmo certainly seems to have agency in his photographs, contradicting the idea that minorities being photographed by a dominant culture can only leave the subject subordinate or objectified. Edmo does not look hostile or uncomfortable in any of the photographs. In fact, he looks like a commanding figure. His nephew described him as someone who liked to dress up and go to powwows and Fourth of July celebrations. If Edmo was a man who liked to be seen then photography may have been a kind of visual performance.¹⁹

The Edmos chose their own outfits to wear in their photographs. Some of the outfits Edmo and his wife Lizzie wear in the photographs are from their travels to other Indian reservations. They are not all simply props from Wrensted's studio. Clothing was a way to communicate economic status and social status, and receiving these clothes gave the Edmos prestige. A photograph of them in this clothing could be a tribute to this prestige, as well as a way to visually show that they were given these clothes, and have this prestige.²⁰ However, Indigenous people could not control what happened to their photography in the future, and as such Indigenous photographs were often exploited.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 76.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 80-3.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 85.

Indigenous Photographs Exploited

One image of Edmo and his family that lost its original purpose is a Wrensted photograph from 1897-98. The photograph portrays Jack Edmo, his wife Lizzie, their son Eugene, and their two daughters, Helen and Bessie. They were wearing what would be considered more traditional Indigenous clothing: Beaded vests, moccasins, Edmo had feathers in his long hair, Helen's dress was decorated with cowrie shells and a hair pipe necklace. Perhaps it was because this photograph fits the stereotype of "traditional" Indigenous clothing, and the sitters looked the stereotypical "traditional" Indigenous family that the photograph was used as a generic image. It was used in the 1979 photographic exhibit *The American Image: Photographs from the National Archives, 1860-1960*. Then it was published in a book with the same title. From there it was used on the cover of the 1991 National Archives staff telephone book, and in the early 1990s was displayed in a National Archives office, it was used on an invitation announcement and a calendar of events.²¹

²¹ Ibid, pp. 86-8.



Benedicte Wrensted, *Jack Edmo and Family*, 1897-98, portrait, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/influences-on-images.htm>.

The photograph lost both the identity of the family in the photo, and the identity of the photographer, as it continued to be used without identification. It was being used not because of the photographer or those photographed, but because the image seemed to represent a typical Indigenous family: One in “traditional” Indigenous clothing, and one representing the stereotype of a Euro-American family. There is an adult male, an adult female, and children. In this photograph the viewer saw what they assumed was a typical nuclear family. I say

assumed, because without the knowledge of who was photographed, a viewer could only make the assumption that this image portrayed an ideal family or a family at all.

In the nineteenth-century portraits were the overwhelming majority of photographs taken in America. These portraits were usually taken for the sitter. They were privately owned, and their narrative created by the owner. In the 1840s, Indigenous portraits were much the same. They were made for the sitters' own reasons. Portraits created by the daguerreotype were innately private, as they were not easily reproduced or displayed. They could be difficult to view and hard to link with words that would give the image a larger or more specific narrative. This made them most useful to the owner and gave them the single narrative of the owner.²²

A change in photographic technology would also change how Indigenous portraits were viewed and their narratives expanded beyond the owners' original meaning. The glass-plate negative processes in the late 1850s would change the encounter between the photographer and sitter. Greater commercial possibilities would change how Indigenous portraits were viewed and their narratives perceived. The sitter's reason for having their photograph taken became of lesser importance, as the demand for Indigenous portraits rose. Instead of portraits taken as a family keepsake and a family keepsake only, the photograph would enter the public realm and take on a whole new story.²³

As seen with the Edmo family portrait, once the sitter lost control of the image, the narrative began to change. The Edmo family had no control over what happened to the negatives of the images that were taken of the family. This image in particular took on a narrative beyond a family keepsake, at least to the Euro-American viewer. As paper

²² Martha Sandweiss. *Print the Legend*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002) pp. 215.

²³ *Ibid.* pp. 215.

photographs grew in popularity along with tintypes and ambrotypes, Indigenous portraits started to be used more for Euro-American publishers and viewers. The Edmo family portrait is an example of this, as it became used for Euro-Americans in calendars, and as a generic photograph in archival exhibits, but no attempt was made to find out who the sitters were or even who the photographer was.

This photograph of what viewer's likely identified as a typical Indigenous family left the private sphere of the Edmo family, and became a part of the public sphere taking on a metaphorical meaning in the eyes of the viewer. What Jack Edmo had most likely thought of as a commemoration of his family in a portrait, became, as Martha Sandweiss states, "an ahistorical visual metaphor."²⁴

The visual metaphor of the "brave savage" can be seen in one Wrensted photograph that is rather well known and easily recognizable, and was of Bannock, Logan Appenay. Much like with the Edmo family photograph this photograph's narrative would change as the photograph left the private sphere for the public one. There was a painted floral backdrop and Appenay was wearing heavily beaded clothing with a hair roach, feather, and draped blanket. Appenay was wearing beaded moccasins, loom-beaded garters, anklets with bells, a loom-beaded bandolier, a Great Lakes floral design breechcloth, a shirt with floral designs on the yoke as well as the cuffs, a chocker, and multiple necklaces, which included a sash of bugle beads over the shoulder. In the photograph a dance bustle is visible behind him. While his breechcloth and moccasins were decorated with floral designs that were not traditional for Northern Shoshone or Bannock, the wear of the clothing and the fact that in another photograph he was wearing the same clothing at an outdoor event means the items he was

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 215.

wearing were not props, but Appenay's own clothing. Anthropologist Joanna Scherer was able to identify him as a Grass Dancer, and this image is one of a Grass Dancer.



Benedicte Wrensted, *Logan Appenay*, 1905-1908, portrait, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/influences-on-images.htm>.

However, when this image entered the public sphere it became an image that exemplified the “noble savage.” It was on the cover of *The American Image* in 1979, and made into a mural for an archival conservation exhibit from 1989 through 1994. Appenay was sitting in the portrait, but his upright pose was one that exuded confidence and power, and with the contrasts between the floral background and “traditional” Indigenous clothing the image reinforces the view of a “noble savage.” Without historical context or the knowledge of the photographer or sitter the image’s narrative is a generic one representing an unknown man

that looks like a stereotype of an Indigenous man, much like the Edmo family photograph is a generic image of a stereotypical Indigenous family.

However, Scherer was able to identify the photographer as Benedicte Wrensted, and those photographed as Jack Edmo and his family and Logan Appenay. According to Jack Edmo's nephew, Edward Edmo Sr. his uncle enjoyed having photographs taken and going to public events with his family. To the Edmo family the photograph "presents an image of a fun-loving, extroverted person, atypical of his family,"²⁵ the photographs kept by the Edmos are of Jack Edmo and his family in beaded Indigenous clothing rather than the everyday clothing of a rancher. This image is in contrast to its use as a generic photograph used by Euro-Americans that believed the portrait was simply exemplifying a typical Indigenous family.

With the knowledge of who the photographer was and who was being photographed the viewer can look beyond the stereotype of the "noble savage." Bonnie Wadsworth a Shoshone Bannock member describes the photographs as "strong and they (Indigenous peoples) looked dignified, and there is so much in the picture I can talk about. This is our way of sharing information and teaching people about our culture."²⁶ The extent of Wrensted's photographs is not known nor is it known to what extent the surviving glass plates and photographs represent her entire collection, or if her works were filtered by the person(s) who saved and sent the images to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1920s and 1930s. What is clear is that the surviving images saved were perhaps influenced by the Plains Indian stereotype. This stereotype had been firmly established by the twentieth-century.

²⁵ Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) pp. 88.

²⁶ PBS. "Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows," July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj>

Photographer Edward S. Curtis wrote in 1906, “The Northwest Plains Indian is, to the average person, the typical American Indian, the Indian of our school-day books – powerful of physique, statuesque, gorgeous in dress.”²⁷ However, when looked at in the historical context, and by discovering the photographer and the sitter(s) in Wrensted’s photographs, such as the Edmo family’s portrait or Logan Appenay’s portrait one can see beyond the “noble savage” stereotype that it seems to portray. In the future, photographs of Indigenous people were exploited by Euro-Americans, but when the photographs were taken Indigenous peoples were choosing how they were represented in photographs, which differed from Euro-Americans.

Indigenous and Euro-American Photographs

When taking the photographs of Indigenous peoples many photographers used props, such as pipe bags, baskets, and blankets to showcase the Indianness of the sitter(s). These props can illustrate important information about the photographer’s ideas on symbolism. Wrensted followed these established conventions to use studio props. The one prop most used by Wrensted to signal an Indigenous sitter was a blanket. In contrast she did not use a blanket as a prop when photographing Euro-American sitters. For her, the blanket symbolized an Indigenous person as such.

The differences in photographs of Indigenous people versus Euro-American people can be seen in a photograph of E.O. Leonard and Willis Reeves, both Euro-American, who pictured in front of a painted background in three-piece suits. Willis’ trousers were too long and his shirtsleeves too short indicting his less affluent socio-economic class than Leonard whose suit was perfectly tailored to him. There was also no blanket used in the photograph. In another photograph an unknown Shoshone Bannock man was standing in front of the same

²⁷ Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) pp. 88.

painted backdrop. He was wearing an otter fur sash, a hair roach, strips of cloth decorated with ermine tied to his arms, and notched feathers hanging on his left side. He was holding a pipe tomahawk and fringed pipe bag. He was standing not on his own blanket, but on a commercially bought blanket. Wrensted was using as a prop.



Benedicte Wrensted, *E.O. Leonard and Willis Reeves*, 1902, portrait, Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives, Eugene O. Leonard Collection, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/influences-on-images.htm>.



Benedicte Wrensted, *unknown*, n/a, portrait, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/influences-on-images.htm>.

In the nineteenth century the term “blanket Indians” was coined and referred to the use of blankets as a basic item of dress, and designated the Indigenous sitter as one who refused to adopt Euro-American dress and values. Blankets gained their association with Indigenous peoples through the woven blankets created by some tribes, more specifically the Navajo. It was a practical item of trade and goods from the earliest contact between Indigenous peoples and whites. This made the blanket an easy signifier of the “Indianness” of the sitter.²⁸

Another contrast between Wrensted’s Indigenous photographs and Euro-American photographs was the posture and poses. While some of her Euro-American sitters are posed standing, facing the camera, many are also posed in profile. There are also many who are looking away from the camera. This is in contrast to her photographs of Shoshone Bannock who are almost all looking directly at the camera. They are also standing, but they are facing

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 88.

the camera in the photographs. Their bodies are not turned slightly to the side, like the Euro-American sitters. Wrensted also created portraits where the sitter is only shown from the waist up for her Euro-American clients. This is a major difference between Euro-Americans and Indigenous sitters. In her Euro-American portraits the focus is on the subject's face, and only the upper half of the body is shown vignette within an oval frame. One such photograph shows Louis William Meyers and his wife Almira Huff from the waist up within an oval frame on a gray-green mount. This style seemed to imitate the painted miniatures that characterized the European portraiture tradition.²⁹



Benedicte Wrensted, *Louis and Almira Huff*, n/a, portrait, Scherer Personal Collection, n/a, <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/reading-photographs.htm>.

However, Wrensted's photographs of Indigenous sitters were usually full length. This pose highlighted the clothing of the subject while lessening the emphasis of the face. It can be assumed the Shoshone Bannock chose this pose, as most sitters could choose poses from examples that were displayed in Wrensted's studio. Shoshone Bannock Rosemary Devinney states, "I'm always fascinated with what I see in the photographs. They were very meticulous

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 88.

about how they dressed, is what I noticed. They also carried themselves in a certain way when they were taking photos.”³⁰ In contrast to the European tradition of portraiture, the full-length poses are consistent with the lack of this tradition in Indigenous culture. In rock art as well as in nineteenth century ledger art, human figures are not individuals, but rather general full-length figures.³¹ They are depicted as part of the larger Indigenous community rather than simply individuals.

While, Wrensted used many photographic conventions of the time, she had her own unique way of going about her photography. She retouched and varnished her negatives rather than leaving imperfections in her images. She would brush faces and hands to erase shadows, blemishes, or signs of aging. This helped her assure customer satisfaction. While retouching was not uncommon, Wrensted had a unique way of varnishing in a circular pattern around the sitter. Depth of field in her photographs varies from three feet to more distant shots in light to less than one foot in close-up and low light. Her camera angle was no more than waist high, and exposure time ranged from one-half to one-twenty fifth second. She was dependent on natural light until 1907. Her dependence on natural light can be seen in the absence of ill light and the shadowed eyes of the subjects. Her backdrops depicted nature as well as log fences and floor coverings of fur or fake grass to perhaps place her Indigenous subjects in more “natural” settings. However, Wrensted often used these same painted backdrops for her Euro-American subjects as well.³²

Some of Wrensted’s photographs were circulated as postcards. While some of the local Pocatello residents had the notion to use their Fort Hall neighbors to entice tourists to

³⁰ PBS. “Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows,” July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

³¹ Joanna Scherer. *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) pp. 88.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 90

the area, Wrensted does not seem to use her Indigenous subjects in this way. Indeed, she does not seem to have even advertised her photographs of Indigenous people at her studio. An exterior view of her studio in 1905 shows many Euro-American photographs, but no Indigenous photographs. The interior also lacks any display of Indigenous photographs. However, one image, that of her niece in a dress made out of her photographs, does show Indigenous photographs around the skirt hem. The Indigenous subjects are pictured in Navajo style with the use of blankets and Indigenous artifacts.³³



Benedicte Wrensted, *Ella Wrensted*, 1909, portrait, Scherer Personal Collection, n/a,
<https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/biography-history.htm>.

How active were the Shoshone Bannock in regards to how their images were created and circulated? Evidence suggests that they were aware of the commercial value of photography. In the *Pocatello Tribune* in 1903, an article states, “The Indians are becoming

³³ Ibid. pp. 90.

very much civilized. It is reported that at their dance in the Bottoms Sunday, they sold pies and apples to the visitors. They also charged the ‘White trash’ twenty-five cents for a swing around with the dusky damsels, and posed for pictures at so much per.’³⁴ This suggests that the Shoshone Bannock were well aware of photography’s commercial value. Charging a photographer to take one’s picture was already a tradition among Euro-American and Indigenous celebrities, as was selling a picture for profit.

In contrast, many Shoshone Bannock women who would visit Pocatello often refused to be photographed. Outdoor shots taken by Wrensted show women hiding their faces and turning away from the camera. Women were seemingly photographed less frequently than their male counterparts both in the studio and on the streets. Scherer explains this by suggesting the women of the Shoshone and Bannock were more concerned about privacy.³⁵

There are two photographs of women hiding their faces that stand out. One is of two women on the streets of Pocatello. The woman closer to the camera was not turned away, but her eyes were closed. While the woman to the left had her face turned away from the camera and only her profile was shown. They were both using a kerchief to cover their heads, which was a common item of clothing to protect the face from wind and sun. Here however, they are also being employed to protect the faces of the two women from the camera.³⁶

The other photograph is of two women sitting under a sunshade sometime in the summer. The railroad is seen in the background of the photograph. A saddle blanket was hanging over the front pole. Both of these women were also wearing kerchiefs, and were using them to keep their faces hidden from Wrensted’s camera.

³⁴ Ibid. pp. 121.

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 122.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 122-3.

What makes these pictures significant is how the women were hiding their faces away in more candid photography, while their faces were clearly shown in the portraits Wrensted took in her studio. Though it seems Wrensted took more photographs of Indigenous men both in her studio and out, it is interesting to note that Indigenous women seemed more comfortable having their photograph taken in the studio rather than out and about living their daily lives in Pocatello. Scherer could be correct that the women were shy or perhaps more reluctant to have a camera lens invading their privacy. Or perhaps it is simply because they were going about their everyday lives, and stopping for a photograph would slow down their daily routine. It is possible as well that they recognized a difference between paying for a staged photograph in the studio, and a photograph being taken without permission or payment. These candid photographs could be seen as an intrusion on their lives.

It seems Wrensted was not interested in the ethnology of the Northern Shoshone, Bannock or Lemhi tribes. There is no evidence to suggest she was given a Shoshone Bannock name, of her participating in any ceremonial events on the Fort Hall Reservation, or of her trying to sell the Indigenous images to museums, collectors, or to large scale postcard distributors. She did not seek out Indigenous clients; rather her Indigenous photographs came about by the Shoshone Bannock going to her studio. It seems, regardless of whether Wrensted partook in Indigenous events, many Shoshone Bannock were not reluctant to have their photographs taken at her studio. There is nothing in my research to suggest they had reason to distrust Wrensted or feel uncomfortable in her studio: enough so, that some such as Jack Edmo had numerous pictures taken of himself and his family. Could this be because of Wrensted's prominence in the community of Pocatello? She was heavily involved in church activities, and interacted with many of the local women who had connections to the Fort Hall

Reservation. Could it have been Wrensted's personality itself? She was considered kind and welcoming to her patrons. Or perhaps it was because Wrensted was not working for anyone but herself, meaning her photographs at the time taken were not being used to foster government propaganda or the vanishing race myth that other photographers, such as Edward S. Curtis were promoting. Wrensted was simply taking photographs of people who wanted and paid for their photographs to be taken.

Wrensted also did not seem to have a problem photographing the Shoshone Bannock. According to Scherer's research, Wrensted was well liked by the Shoshone and Bannock people who went to her studio. She would even take handicrafts from them instead of payment for the photographs. The Indigenous clients would then receive copies of the photographs. Many of these photographs have remained with the clients' relatives, though Wrensted may have also given some of the photographs to her Euro-American friends.³⁷

Wrensted was first and foremost a portrait photographer. Her images were in no way candid, but followed the convention of using props and painted backgrounds. The subjects were often seated or told to stand in a posed position. Most were formal and some even theatrical. Her Indigenous subjects were sometimes dressed in "traditional" Indigenous clothing. Some were dressed in traditional Euro-American dress. Some resisted the pressure to assimilate, while others did not. What makes Wrensted so significant was that she photographed a variety of people. Ranching clothes, "traditional" clothes, men, women, children, she would take their photograph, as she would have done for a Euro-American client. Indigenous peoples had autonomy and made their own choices for how they were represented in a white studio. As Shoshone Bannock Rosemary Deviney states, "We're

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 120

really fortunate as tribal people, that we have these photos that were taken of our people from way back.”³⁸

³⁸ *PBS*. “Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows,” July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

Chapter Two

Indigenous Photography and Assimilation During the Dawes Act

E. Jane Gay was not a professional photographer. She was not professionally trained, studied at a photography school or previously worked for profit in her own studio. Her role as a photographer for anthropologist, Alice C. Fletcher was not made official by the government. Photography was not even her only role while traveling through Idaho and the Nez Perce reservation. She also performed chores for Fletcher, such as cooking and laundry. Fletcher and Gay did not impose the Dawes Act of 1887 with weapons or violence, but with pen and camera. They were not men violently forcing land allotment. Gay did not photograph the Nez Perce to show a vanishing race. However, Gay did purposefully showcase a federal policy of enforced pacification.

Gay would take several hundred photographs of the allotment process under the direction of Fletcher. The photographs may seem documentary, but Gay had an agenda to showcase Fletcher in a positive light. One of authority, and as someone bringing civilization to the Nez Perce, and changing the American West landscape for the better: No longer would the Nez Perce be a nomadic people, but would instead do as the Westerners were doing and stay firmly in one place. The government had an agenda for the landscape, and made it clear to Fletcher what lands the Nez Perce would be allotted. Any land that had profitable mines she was to report, as the government did not want the Nez Perce to have it, even if on reservation land. Gay would document this all, and show the changing landscape, and try to capture a positive image of the process. If however, one looks beyond the static image of Fletcher, a kindly somewhat dowdy middle-aged woman bringing civilization to the backwards Indigenous peoples, the images capture a resilient people who worked the act to

their own advantages, and their resilience can be seen through Gay's camera lens.³⁹ By critically analyzing Gay's photography, I argue the images portray both the government's assimilation agenda and the agency of the Indigenous captured in the photographs. This chapter also looks at how future generations of Indigenous peoples respond to the photographs and how they continue the legacy of the images.

In 1887 the General Allotment Act or Dawes Act was created. The Act would change the landscape of the American West, and the Indigenous peoples living in it, by creating a system of landholding that went to individuals, and took care of a Euro-American "Indian Problem" that included nomadic tribes. Euro-American interests in wanting to gain more land created the act, as well as humanitarians who thought it best to assimilate Indigenous peoples into American life. By allotting land the government hoped to stop assistance to the Indigenous peoples and create farming entrepreneurs.

Congress would change the humanitarian parts of the act early on. This increased the possibility of white ranchers and farmers to more easily own reservation land. The Burke Act of 1906 shortened the time the land would be in trust to those who were deemed competent by the Secretary of the Interior. If not judged competent the trust period would be potentially lengthened past the original twenty-five years, and citizenship could be delayed when only a simple fee patent was needed.⁴⁰

At the president's discretion reservation land was to be divided into allotments that became the property of individual tribal members. Once receiving the allotment, the tribal member became a citizen of the United States. The title was held in trust for twenty-five years

³⁹ Nicole Tonkovich. *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012) pp. 3-6.

⁴⁰ Frank Stuart. "United States Indian Policy: From the Dawes Act to the American Indian Policy Review Commission." *Social Service Review*. Vo. 51, No. 3, Sep. 1977. The University of Chicago Press. pp. 452-3.

by the United States government. At the end of twenty-five years the land would belong to the tribal member in full and he would have full control over the land and would have to pay property taxes. Any surplus lands, which were land that did not become part of an allotment, would be sold by the United States in parcels not exceeding 160 acres.⁴¹

This act is an important part of assimilation history. It furthered divided Indigenous lands, curtailed nomadic travel, and according to Nicole Tonkovich failed. Yet Gay's photographs, which portray the act being implemented, have seen little analysis. They also have not been critically analyzed in conjunction to other women photographers of Indigenous peoples. Nor has Indigenous agency been looked at through her photographs.

The main goal of the act was to integrate Indigenous people into becoming American citizens. Due to the surplus land sales, and an amendment in 1891 that allowed the leasing of allotments by non-Indigenous, white ranchers and farmers were able to use reservation land. The Dawes Act failed to create Indigenous entrepreneurs however, by the late 1920s Indigenous land diminished. Not being able to obtain credit, inexperienced in farming, and allotments being too small to be financially sustainable, the Indigenous land owners sold or leased their lands or would end up losing their lands due to not being able to pay state and local taxes. Allotments that were still held in trust became fragmented when the landowner died. The allotment was then divided among the original land owner's many heirs.⁴²

How Gay portrayed Indigenous peoples was different than how other photographers of the time did. Benedicte Wrensted photographed the Shoshone Bannock in portraits that were often commissioned by the sitter and not by an outside agency, such as the government. While Wrensted used props, she did not have a government agenda in photographing her Indigenous

⁴¹ Ibid. 453.

⁴² Ibid. 454.

sitters. If they were willing to pay, she was willing to take their photographs. Others took photographs for ethnological purposes due to a strongly held belief in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the Indigenous peoples were going to disappear. Edward S. Curtis is a famous early twentieth century photographer of Indigenous peoples. He felt he was in a race against time to take these photographs before the Indigenous peoples disappeared. He firmly believed in the vanishing race myth: that soon photographs were all that was going to be left of the Indigenous peoples of the United States. The assimilation process would be so complete that no Indigenous person would be left. Curtis' photographs have been studied extensively, and when studying Indigenous photography his name is often the first mentioned or thought of. However, it is not only white men who have a history of photographing Indigenous people. Gay did not believe in the vanishing race myth, and while Curtis wanted to picture his Indigenous sitters in what he considered traditional Indigenous clothing, Gay wanted the opposite. She wanted pictures showcasing assimilation, and few of her photographs depict the Indigenous pictured in "traditional" clothing. While Curtis captured what he believed to be a vanishing race due to assimilation, Gay photographed assimilation in action. Her photographs show a government policy of assimilation and the resilient Indigenous peoples who fought against this policy. Gay's photographs deserve as much attention in historical study as Curtis', as they highlight not a myth, but an actual policy.

Arriving on the Reservation

From the moment Gay and Fletcher arrived on the Nez Perce Reservation the atmosphere was tense. Gay states in one of her letters, "they report that the Indians are 'disturbed,' which does not surprise us, and that there are many signs of hostility on their part,

which we do well to heed.”⁴³ Far from being the backwards and now docile peoples many contemporaries of the time supposed, the Nez Perce were well aware of the politics and deals made around them, even if they were not included in them. Still, this narrative as Nicole Tonkovich explains, “meant a woman could be appointed to oversee the legal imperatives enabling the United States to consolidate its continental land holdings at the end of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁴ Fletcher herself perpetrates this idea when she describes Chief Joseph as peaceful but unable to keep up with the modernity of the Euro-Americans, “I doubt he is able to go much further in progressive ideas.”⁴⁵ Gay then takes a photograph to further this narrative that is sent to Electa Sanderson Dawes, the wife of the senator the act is named after.

In the photograph, three people are pictured. One was a tall, proud Indigenous man, one was an indigenous man kneeling, and the other was the innocent-looking Alice Fletcher standing before them. Gay in all likelihood took this photograph to show the peaceful way in which Fletcher was enforcing the Dawes Act. Fletcher was calmly talking to the two men; her stance was comfortable and not aggressive or violent. It seems as if the two men were listening to her speak and deferring to her judgment. A peaceful conversation captured in a positive light, that belies the consequences of the Dawes Act on the Nez Perce. The idea of a peaceful people who must rely on a white woman to instruct them on how to live is a clear narrative of the photograph.

⁴³ Jane Gay to ‘N’ May 1889. *Choup-nit-ki*. (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho State University: Special Collections and University Archives), <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll34>.

⁴⁴ Nicole Tonkovich. *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012) pp. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 3.



E. Jane Gay, *Chief Joseph with Alice C. Fletcher, Gov't Allotment Agent when the Nez Perce Reservation was thrown open*. James Stuart Kneeling, 1890, Idaho State Historical Society Library and Archives, in *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012) pp. 2.

This may have been Gay's vision for the photograph, but the lens shows another narrative if looked upon by the Indigenous subjects of the image. Chief Joseph refused to accept the allotment of the reservation land. In the image Joseph was wearing his long hair braided and was holding a blanket symbolizing his refusal to accept the Dawes Act. This was in direct contrast to not only the photographic narrative Gay was portraying, but also the narrative Fletcher depicts to Mrs. Dawes through her writing. Chief Joseph was not backwards, but neither was he willing to break up his people's land because Fletcher and the government were telling him he must.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 4

Even the kneeling Indigenous man was not as docile as he appears. This man was James Stuart, Fletcher's interpreter. He was kneeling not because he chooses to, but because Gay asked him to, so there could be a line break in the photograph with two standing and one kneeling. Stuart had more power than this picture captures. He translated the negotiations upon which the allotment of land was built, and mediated between Fletcher and the agent. A seemingly loyal supporter of Fletcher's, his loyalty allowed him to promote his own ends without Fletcher noticing. After allotment he became a political figure who used the skills he gained working for Fletcher, such as diplomatic acumen and knowledge of federal policy to establish programs that helped the Nez Perce begin to reclaim lands, monies, and cultural patrimonies. In a round-about way Stuart undid what Fletcher had tried to accomplish with allotment. He may be kneeling in the photograph, but Stuart was no more an ignorant man than Chief Joseph.⁴⁷ They represent what a Nez Perce man was and could be. Of this picture Reverend Dr. Jane Miles of the Nez Perce tribe states, "I used to just hate that picture of her and Chief Joseph, but now I can look at the picture and realize that this is part of my history. That historical trauma has made us a very strong people. We're resilient. We can bounce back from whatever has been handed to us."⁴⁸

Fletcher seemed unable to realize this resistance, as she complained that her, "progressive ideas" were not being readily accepted by the Nez Perce. Seeing as how the United States government had implemented the act without considering the very people who lived on the land, Fletcher should not have seemed so surprised. However, she was of the mind that to help the Indigenous peoples they needed to assimilate into the life of Euro-

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 4.

⁴⁸ PBS. "Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows," July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

Americans. The Euro-Americans farmed and were ranchers, they lived in one place, and owned one parcel of land, and so it would behoove the Nez Perce to do the same.

Still, it seems neither Fletcher nor Gay felt in much danger no matter the tension or disagreements. Upon first arriving in Lapwai Gay writes, “we plan our work and see no very big lions in the way, no more fearsome thing before us than the robin sees, who flies past, with a long fish-worm in its bill, to its young whose gaping mouths are, all in a row, at the edge of their ragged nest in a corner of the roof of the verandah.”⁴⁹ Gay is comparing the Nez Perce to a lowly robin who lives in a decrepit home in a corner of a more civilized world. She is also making it clear that the Nez Perce are no longer the fierce people (lion) of the past, and can do no more harm than a robin. There is no need to fear being around or living near them.

There is a great deal of confidence in Fletcher and Gay’s writings, and perhaps this was why Gay describes Fletcher as “her majesty” as if the Nez Perce were her lowly subjects. A white woman of privilege arriving to save the ignorant Indigenous from their backwards lifestyle into the modern realm of civilization. Gay describes Fletcher explaining the allotment act as thus, “Her Majesty read her instructions to the delegation and explained that it was her sworn duty to place the Indians upon their best lands and in the localities where they would most rapidly become self-supporting and valuable citizens, not to dispose of them that they must be paupers and a charge upon the white population.”⁵⁰ This gives credence to the idea of the Dawes Act had been created so the Indigenous would not become wards of the government, and could be self- sustaining farmers and ranchers. Gay also alludes to how a valuable citizen can only be one that assimilates to Euro-American life. It is further indicative of Gay’s idea of being a savior of the Nez Perce people: How the Dawes Act and those, such

⁴⁹ Jane Gay to ‘N’ May 1889. *Choup-nit-ki*. (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho State University: Special Collections and University Archives), <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll34>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 15

as Fletcher delegating the act are saving the Nez Perce from themselves. With the Dawes Act they will be able to function successfully as citizens and lead more promising lives than the ones they are or were currently living. This also means they would not be a burden upon the Euro-Americans and the government. Through the Dawes Act, white Americans such as Gay felt, the Nez Perce would be given a way to be successful ranchers and no longer live in poverty.

Gay portrays this life she and Fletcher, and those who were in agreement with the Dawes Act imagine in many of her photographs. In one, a log cabin was in the background. Three Nez Perce men were standing by the cabin. One was in the doorway and a dog stands in front of him. The other two men were standing at the corner of the house. All three were in Euro-American style clothing: Felt hats, western style shirts, vests, jackets, and trousers. The man in the middle and the man on the left were wearing moccasins, while the man on the right was wearing leather shoes. The cabin looks to be built of square-hewn logs and had glass windows, a thatched roof, and two chimney pipes. In the tall grass surrounding the cabin there was a wash tub and various other objects. This little log cabin could be the home of any Euro-American settler just as easily as it is the home of a Nez Perce man. Along with the Euro-American style of clothing, Gay was capturing a moment of assimilation and proof that the Dawes act can make as Tonkovich states, “the rectilinear logic of equivalent land ownership rationalize even this rugged place.”⁵¹ This image portrays how a successful Dawes Act should look. The Indigenous living on parcels of land, cultivating that land, and creating homes, such as log cabins. A rather idyllic outlook in the image, but the image does not show the tension

⁵¹ Nicole Tonkovich. *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012) pp. 3.

or push back against the Dawes Act or how the act was a forceful policy of assimilation imposed upon many unwilling participants.



E. Jane Gay, *Indian Men by Log Cabin*, 1889, photograph, Nez Perce Reservation, Lewis County, Idaho, United States, Idaho State Archives,

<https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll20/id/78/rec/107>.

Gay's Portrayal in Photographs

Unlike Benedicte Wrensted, Gay did not photograph her Indigenous subjects in “traditional” clothing. In Gay’s images long hair and moccasins were the closest indicators of “traditional” clothing, and the only stereotypical symbols, of a person being Indigenous. Gay was much more focused on showing the assimilation of Indigenous peoples through and through. After all, that was the reason Fletcher and Gay were on the Nez Perce reservation, to

assimilate the Nez Perce into a lifestyle similar to the Euro-Americans. Gay was taking photographic proof to send back to Senator Dawes that his act was working, and that Fletcher was successfully implementing the act, and how the Nez Perce were accepting the policy. She would send some of these photographs back East to Senator Dawes. In turn he could show how his policy was having a positive impact on Indigenous communities.

Gay's goal was not to show the transition between tradition and assimilation, but to show that the Nez Perce had already assimilated. That they may be ignorant backwards people, but they are harmless, docile, and willing to assimilate to the Euro-American culture. Wrensted photographed her subjects in both "traditional" and Euro-American clothing, but Gay mostly portrayed them in western clothing. While Wrensted used props, such as a Navajo blanket to symbolize those in her photographs as Indigenous, a common practice of the time, Gay did not feel the need to use props in this way. What could pass for props in Gay's images were the fences and cabins she had those in her photographs stand beside. Instead of using a prop to symbolize their Indigenous status, she uses props to symbolize their assimilation to Euro-American culture, and their willingness to do so. Historical context is important in analyzing Gay's images. Without the knowledge of the Dawes Act, assimilation, and Indigenous resistance, Gay's images seem to show how successful assimilation policies were. Wrensted took mostly portraits at the request of her Indigenous sitters, however, Gay did not take portraits and her photographs were not meant to commemorate an event for an Indigenous client, but instead they were meant to document the Dawes Act in the most positive light possible.

In a photograph of James Stuart with his mother and sister this can be seen. In the foreground were Stuart, his mother, Suzanne, and his sister, Nancy. Stuart and Nancy were

kneeling while Suzanne was sitting. Stuart was wearing a plaid shirt, a dark jacket and vest, Levis, boots, and he was holding a broad-brimmed felt hat. Suzanne had braided hair, and she was wearing a calico dress with a gathered bodice, ruffled cuffs, and inset panels of gingham on the ruffled skirt. Her hands were folded at her waist and there was a ring on her right hand middle finger. She was seated on a chair covered with a blanket. Nancy had long hair tied with a bow, and was wearing a light colored pinafore-style dress over a longer skirt. Three Nez Perce pictured wearing typical Euro-American style clothing at the time. If the viewer were strictly going by the clothing of the three subjects, they might assume they are Euro-American. They were wearing nothing to symbolize they were Nez Perce nor anything that symbolizes “traditional” Indigenous clothing. They seem to have already assimilated to Euro-American clothing by the time Gay took this photograph. In the background of the photograph there was a fence. This could symbolize the order the Dawes Act was trying to create in a part of the country the government felt was unordered and uncivilized.



E. Jane Gay, *James Stuart, His Mother, and His Sister*, 1889, photographer, Nez Perce Reservation, Lewis County, Idaho, United States, Idaho State Archives,
<https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll20/id/155/rec/113>.

In Gay's objective to show the Dawes Act and assimilation in a positive light, she photographs what Martha Sandweiss calls "good Indians." This "good Indian" is the Indigenous person who has left his tribal customs and community and transformed from barbarian ways into a more civilized way of life. Stuart, for example is a common subject of Gay's photography. He worked as an interpreter, a job most likely acceptable to Euro-American standards, he wore Euro-American clothing, could speak English fluently, and seemed to be loyal to Fletcher's assimilation cause. Stuart was the perfect person to showcase the positives of the Dawes Act, as he seemed to be benefiting from it and happy with it. Of course, the "good Indian"⁵² would take on a much worse connotation of Indian annihilation, but Gay and Fletcher never took this position. In my research I found no evidence to believe Gay or Fletcher wanted the Indigenous people to disappear. Rather they seemed to truly believe that assimilation would make them happier and more productive people. They firmly believed they were helping, while being unable to see the damage and hypocrisy being done by the Dawes Act.

This hypocrisy is clear when Gay complained that she heard one Nez Perce man state, "why in thunder did the Government send a woman to do this work? We could have got a holt on a man."⁵³ Gay and Fletcher do have power many nineteenth century women did not, Fletcher especially. Fletcher is given the task of allotting land, and given the power by being made a federal agent to do so by the government. By being associated with Fletcher, Gay is basically given free reign to photograph what she wants. As Tonkovich states, "allotment to the Nez Perce, one of the first tribal groups to be subjected to a policy designed to eliminate Native politics and cultures, proceeded on the assumption that their violent resistance was a

⁵² Martha Sandweiss. *Print the Legend*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002) pp. 243.

⁵³ Jane Gay to 'N' May 1889. *Choup-nit-ki*. (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho State University: Special Collections and University Archives), <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll34>.

thing of the past.”⁵⁴ A woman could safely do the government’s work among the Nez Perce, as they were no longer a physical threat. As these two women had the backing of the government behind them, giving them more power than many women in the 1890s, they used their power to oppress and force assimilation upon the Nez Perce. In their need to do what they consider helping, Gay and Fletcher are unaware of how they are using their power to oppress.

Assimilation Portrayed in Landscape

Gay’s photography shows this oppression within her landscape images. They may at first seem innocent enough. Many were of Fletcher walking through an empty field with mountains and pine trees in the background. The rugged landscape looks as if it could represent freedom, open spaces, and a romantic wilderness; however, a closer look shows the beginnings of the exact opposite. Of squared off land and fences: The open fields being squared off to form farms and a wilderness that was being controlled, contained, and evaporating through Fletcher’s pen and paper. Gay’s photographs show the final moments before the landscape changes from one of freedom to one of organized control and oppression of the Nez Perce.

In one photograph two people stand against the backdrop of the landscape. One was Alice Fletcher. She was somewhat obscured by her bonnet, and her back was turned toward the camera. The other person was most likely James Stuart. His back was also turned toward the camera, and both were pointing up a hill. The rolling landscape with pine trees, and dry grass was the background of the image and takes up most of the image. The two people were small in comparison. At first glance it looks like two people taking in the unique scenery of

⁵⁴ Nicole Tonkovich. *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012) pp. 3.

Idaho. Pointing at the hills in the people-less view beyond. However, the reason Fletcher and Stuart both have an arm outstretched pointing in the distance was not to point out the views. Instead they were pointing out areas of allotment.



E. Jane Gay, *Bear's Claw Mountain*, 1889, photograph, Nez Perce Reservation, Lewis County, Idaho, United States, Idaho State Archives, <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll20/id/37/rec/15>.

This view, one of forced allotment, changes the image from positive; the way Gay probably meant it, to negative. The open rolling hills that represent freedom and space will be broken into sections. Nakia Williamson of the Nez Perce tribe states, “This was the land that was ours. You know we weren’t brought to this place. We were created in this land. The land was the law. We weren’t the law.”⁵⁵ No longer will the United States government allow Indigenous people to roam nomadically through this landscape. Instead land will be sectioned off to farm. There was no aggression to the poses of Fletcher or Stuart, and yet they were about to change the landscape for the Indigenous people forever. With one sweep of Fletcher’s hand the decision of who owns what or who is given what was decided. Fences

⁵⁵ PBS. “Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows,” July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

would be built, crops sowed, and cattle brought in to replace the openness of rolling hills and stately pine trees.

In another deceptively innocent photograph, Gay captured Fletcher walking through an empty field. The location was probably Lapwai. The background of the photograph includes hills on the right and pine trees on the left. Fletcher was the only person in the photograph, and she is wearing a bonnet and a gathered skirt, and a dark short jacket. She was carrying papers and an empty bag. Much like the first image, this one shows an open space with no fences or livestock. The landscape was somewhat sparse the ground covered by grass and few trees. Fletcher looks out of place in the vast, open landscape. One can only speculate why Gay took this photograph. However, there is nothing negative that jumps out of the image right away. Without the historical context it looks only like a woman walking through an open landscape.



E. Jane Gay, *Alice Fletcher – Starting for Washington with Reports*, 1882, photograph, Nez Perce Reservation, Lewis County, Idaho, United States, Idaho State Archives, <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll20/id/131/rec/6>.

Fletcher looks innocent and even picturesque in these images. There is nothing threatening about her person. She does not look like a federal agent who has the power or the backing of the government. She looks like a middle-aged woman wondering among the fields. One wonders if perhaps this is why the government chose a woman to enact their policy. She is a less threatening figure, and women at the time were perceived as calm of nature, delicate, and non-violent. Her education, past experience with Indigenous peoples, and connections in D.C. were also likely a factor, but perhaps the government knew she would seem less threatening than a man with a gun.

As seen in the first photograph, with a sweep of her hand, Fletcher was able to change the open field into squares. Divide the land in ways she thought suitable. The second photograph is interesting as it is captioned, "Starting for Washington with Reports." It implies that Fletcher is heading back to Washington D.C. with her reports in hand. That the papers in her hand were her reports for her superiors in D.C. and how to allot the land. There is a note of self-importance to the title, or that Gay wanted Fletcher to seem important. The caption gave Fletcher an air of authority. It also highlights how the allotment, and subsequently the land squared off for the Nez Perce was all in her hands.

Gay's Portrayal as a White Woman

Gay and Fletcher were not the first nor the last white women to believe themselves saviors of the Indigenous peoples. Margaret D. Jacobs states, "government authorities and reformers relied not only on racial representation, but also on gendered images of Indigenous people, particularly regarding motherhood, as a justification for intervening in the intimate spaces of Indigenous communities."⁵⁶ The woman's very role within this nineteenth century

⁵⁶ Margaret D. Jacobs. "Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Reform in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940." *Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 36, No. 4., 2005. pp. 456.

family structure, and how maternal women naturally were believed to be, helped give them the supposed authority to know what was best for the Indigenous peoples.

In Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks' book *Women and Gender in the American West*, they state that western women fall into four stereotypical categories, "gentle tamers, sub-bonneted helpmates, hell-raisers, and bad women. The gentle tamer category encompasses western women as civilizers, ladies, and suffragists."⁵⁷ Gay and Fletcher would fall into the category of gentle tamers. What is interesting to note is how Gay and Fletcher may have, even in the nineteenth century, described themselves as such: the gentle tamers civilizing the Indigenous people by helping them to assimilate to Euro-American ideals. Gentle tamers are heroic women who brought culture and softness to the West.

One way in which white women that they were bringing culture to the West was through religion. Gay felt religion and the Nez Perce who went to church important enough to photograph. In the background center of the photograph was the Presbyterian Church in a clearing between pine trees. Four Nez Perce men and one woman were standing outside the church in the foreground of the photograph. All were in Euro-American clothing, and the woman was carrying an umbrella. For Gay, this was a positive image of assimilation. Religion and God have been brought to the Nez Perce, and Gay not only approved, but was excited to see the Nez Perce in Church. This photograph shows how important religious assimilation was to Gay, and how she believed this was a good influence and brought civilization to the Nez Perce people.

⁵⁷ Mary Ann Irwin & James F. Brooks. *Women and Gender in the American West*. (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2004.) pp. 12.



E. Jane Gay, *James' belfry on the new Church*, 1890, photograph, Nez Perce Reservation, Lewis County, Idaho, United States, Idaho State Historical Society,
<https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll20/id/162/rec/114>.

In her letters Gay described her happiness and surprise at seeing the Nez Perce who attend church and the white missionary woman who Gay believed is doing good work by bringing God to the Nez Perce with her missionary society. Gay wrote in a letter, “it was pleasant to think that the Indian was able to leave his world to relax his habitual scowl of bewilderment in the contemplation of one simple idea.”⁵⁸ Gay goes on to describe the white female missionary in the Presbyterian Church in Lapwai as Kate McBeth, and how she worried about “her Indians.” Again there seems to be this idea that McBeth is taking care of the Nez Perce as if they were children. Religion was seen as a part of assimilating, and Gay’s apparent joy of seeing Indigenous patrons at the church hints at her approval of their behavior.

⁵⁸ Jane Gay to ‘N’ May 1889. *Choup-nit-ki*. (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho State University: Special Collections and University Archives), <https://idahohistory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16281coll34>.

Indigenous Agency

While Gay's photographs seem to portray how well assimilation worked and in effect a negative time in Indigenous history, Indigenous people today have a different view of the photographs. In a PBS documentary about E. Jane Gay and her photography, the Nez Perce interviewed stated that they felt that a viewer of the photographs could see the immense fortitude of their ancestors to live through the Dawes Act. This might seem an odd perspective considering some of Gay's photographs.⁵⁹ One of which was a group of young Nez Perce boys dressed in Civil War uniforms placing wreaths on gravesite. It is not a Nez Perce gravesite either, but the graves of men who fought against the Nez Perce during the Nez Perce War. So, not only were these boys forced to dress in the clothing of their oppressors, but also forced to honor their graves. Those interviewed stated that the historical trauma they and their ancestors have and continue to live through and the strength to endure are seen in these photographs. They also state that ancestors and old people are important to the Nez Perce culture, so having photographs to remember them by is important.⁶⁰ In this way, the Nez Perce are taking back their autonomy over the photographs. Williamson describes what he sees in Gay's photographs, "When I look at those photographs, I understand the immense fortitude that our people had to live through that."⁶¹

⁵⁹ PBS. "Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows," July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.



E. Jane Gay, *Nez Perce Boys*, n/a, photograph, Harvard University's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11038>.

Gay may have taken these photographs in the hopes that they were proof that the Dawes Act was a success; of willing assimilation she, Fletcher, and proponents of the Dawes Act were trying to sell. Her narrative was one of how the government policy was saving the Nez Perce from disappearing or becoming a burden on the government. That somehow the government and in conjunction, Fletcher knew what was best for them to succeed as American citizens. However, this narrative is seemingly not the one carried by those who now own the photographs, as stated in the interviews. They see their ancestors as persevering despite the Dawes Act and other assimilation policies. Even when the photographs were taken the narrative was not only being written by Gay, but also by those being photographed. Stuart and Chief Joseph were listening to Fletcher, but that hardly meant they were willingly participating as Gay's photographs might seemingly portray. An image's narrative is created by both photographer and those who are photographed within the historical context, and while

Gay was creating a narrative of assimilation, the Nez Perce were creating one of resistance and resilience.

Conclusion

Gay's photographs circulated back East, showing the people and more importantly the bureaucrats there that the Dawes Act was a success. With the allotment act these landscapes would change to fenced off areas of land for farming and ranching. The Dawes Act in a way closes the Wild West myth for good. The landscape is being chopped up into farmland and homesteading removes the very freedom and individuality the Wild West myth was built on. By the time Fletcher and Gay were finished the open space of the landscape was closed, and if there ever was a Wild West, it was no more. Gay's photographs show, on first glance, how assimilation was working. Depictions of Indigenous peoples in "traditional" clothing were few and far between. Most were in Euro-American clothing. Cabins, fences, and livestock were pictured: all symbols of a Euro-American lifestyle. The government seemed to have taken care of its "Indian problem."

However, the Nez Perce who were in the images were not the backwards people who needed and wanted to assimilate. Instead, the images show a strong, resilient people who refused to give up their traditions, traditional land, or fade away into history. Chief Joseph never capitulated to assimilation and the Dawes Act. James Stuart would use the skills he learned as Fletcher's interpreter to make political changes that would undermine the Dawes Act, and return land to the Nez Perce. Nez Perce today have found new meanings in the photographs. As Nez Perce Nakia Williamson states, "Many of the images are of our ancestors. Of our old people, and that's important to us."⁶² If the Nez Perce can be

⁶² PBS. "Idaho Experience: Out of the Shadows," July 18, 2019, video, 26:48, <https://www.pbs.org/video/out-of-the-shadows-lqqsj9/>.

recognized as a forward thinking people who survived and pushed for their own agendas, then it can be argued that they had agency in Gay's photographs and were not simply props for a government plan of destruction, but were instead portrayals of survival and resilience.

Chapter Three

Indigenous Photography: Self-Representation

Benedicte Wrensted and E. Jane Gay and their photography have been explored. Two white women who portrayed Indigenous peoples in two different ways, through two different lenses: Wrensted through a business lens and Gay through an assimilation lens. What about the lens of the camera of an Indigenous person? How would an Indigenous person represent their community and other Indigenous people? For a rounded narrative on photographs of Indigenous people an analysis of the photographic work of an Indigenous person needs to be analyzed. A contemporary of Wrensted and Gay who took photographs that countered the narrative of white photographers, and gave Indigenous people their own identity within the photographic field needs a closer look. Jennie Ross Cobb, a Cherokee, took photographs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of her own community and people, and for this reason Cobb is the final photographer to be examined in this study. By showcasing and representing their own communities by using their Indigenous culture the way Jennie Ross Cobb did.

Jennie Fields Ross Cobb was born in December of 1881 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. She was the great-great granddaughter of Principle Chief John Ross, and a member of the Cherokee Nation. Her interest in photography began when she was a student at the Cherokee National Female Seminary in Tahlequah.⁶³ In her early teens her father gave her a Kodak bellows unit. While photography clubs were gaining in popularity, an Indigenous teenager carrying a camera would still have been an unusual sight. Ross used a living room closet as a

⁶³ Staff Reports. "Cherokee Nation Celebrates life, photography of Jennie Ross Cobb." *Cherokee Phoenix*. 2020.

dark room and taught herself to develop the plates. The total number of photographs Cobb has taken is unknown, as many became lost or damaged.⁶⁴

Cobb started her career by taking pictures of her family and their domestic life. Eventually she started to take photographs beyond her home life. Capturing Tahlequah community events and even her classmate at the seminary. In 1900 she became a schoolteacher and her photographic interest started to decline. She would go on to marry Jessie Cobb, a non-Indigenous man and move to Texas where she made and sold postcards. She had one daughter, Genevieve and after the death of her husband in 1940 and then shortly after her daughter, Cobb returned to Oklahoma. She began to restore her family home, now the George M. Murrell Historic Home, and was the museum's first curator. She gave her granddaughter a camera for her fifth birthday, passing on the hobby, and died in 1959.⁶⁵

What makes Cobb's photographs different from Wrensted or Gay's is that she took many candid photographs of the Indigenous people in her community. She captures the daily lives and spontaneous moments in her subjects' lives. They are not always standing in a studio, rigid and unmoving. There are no studio props in these candid photographs either. No Plains Indian or Navajo blankets to show their status as Indigenous, no before and after photographs, no painted backdrops or instructions from the photographer on how to pose. Instead she is capturing people going about their lives. Wearing their everyday clothes and doing their everyday activities, smiling, laughing, and in movement. There is no need for props to show their Indigenous culture, as Cobb was capturing the Indigenous living among themselves.

⁶⁴Nicole Dawn Strathman. "Through Native Lenses: American Indian Vernacular Photographies and Performances of Memories, 1890-1940." *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. 2013. pp. 194-200.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 201-202

A note should be made, that the Ross family were known as more progressive Cherokees that lived a more affluent lifestyle than the traditional Cherokee. The Ross family lived in an opulent house, and had tastes in food, leisure, and clothes that were closer to Euro-American sensibilities. The more traditional Cherokees, which accounted for the majority of the nation, lived in one-room cabins. This means Cobb's photographs are catching the lives of the affluent minority of the Cherokee nation.⁶⁶

Another difference is what kind of photographer Cobb was compared to her white contemporaries: She was not a professional photographer with her own studio like Wrensted. Similarly to Gay, Cobb was self-taught, but she was not indirectly working for the government with an agenda behind her photography. Cobb was an amateur and photography was her hobby. Her objective was to take photographs for the fun of it, not for money or to show the positives of a government program. This has created photographs that are remarkably relatable to the viewer. Young women laughing at a joke, young people on a summer day eating watermelon, Cobb was able to capture common events and happenings of the people in her community.

While Wrensted tried to capture the Indigenous out and about in Pocatello, often as previously described the Shoshone Bannock did not appreciate the nuisance of a camera in their faces. Women in particular hid their faces and seem to have preferred to go about their days unmolested by a camera lens. Wrensted being a white woman could not capture these moments as an outsider, however, Cobb as an Indigenous person herself and as someone who grew up in that community was able to capture those everyday occurrences on camera. As Morgan F. Bell states, "The practice of self-representation reveals an inherent difference

⁶⁶ Morgan F. Bell. "Some Thoughts On 'Taking' Pictures: Imagining 'Indians' and the Counter-Narratives of Visual Sovereignty." *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2011, pp. 205-204.

within these pictures when compared to images of Natives taken by non-Native photographers.”⁶⁷ Whether Cobb realized it or not, she captured unique images of Indigenous peoples.

Cherokee History

The original homeland of the Cherokee Nation was the Western part of North Carolina and portions of Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. In 1833 President Andrew Jackson, passed the Indian Removal Act, which forced removal of the Cherokee into what was then known as Indian Territory, but what is now known as Oklahoma. Principle Chief John Ross lobbied against the removal and was successful in winning tribal sovereignty from the United States Supreme Court in *Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia* and *Cherokee Nation vs. Worcester*. However, this only delayed the forced removal, and Jackson ignoring the Supreme Court decision forced their relocation regardless.⁶⁸

In what is now known as the Trail of Tears the Cherokee were moved from their lands to Indian Territory in the winter of 1838-1839. Others tribes including the Muscogee (Creek), Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole (the Five Civilized Tribes) were removed to Indian Territory as well. Tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples died on the forced march. The Cherokee Nation had to reestablish themselves on the reservation. They did so by re-establishing communities, churches, schools, newspapers and other businesses. The capital became Tahlequah, and became the center for regional business activity and the cultural center.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 97.

⁶⁸ Nicole Dawn Strathman. “Through Native Lenses: American Indian Vernacular Photographies and Performances of Memories, 1890-1940.” *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. 2013. pp. 195.

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 196.

The period of rebuilding lasted from 1849-1860, and included Principle Chief John Ross and his extended family settling in the suburb of Park Hill and building plantation style homes. It also included the Cherokee Nation's building of their own formal education system. In 1861 the Cherokee Nation was disrupted by the American Civil War. Many, though not all Cherokee supported the Confederacy. These were elite Cherokee who derived some of their wealth from the institution of slavery. There was also hope that if the Confederacy won, then the United States would become weak, allowing the Cherokee to strengthen their sovereignty. There were also many promises made to the Cherokee from the Confederacy about sovereignty and the returning of land.⁷⁰

Principle Chief John Ross tried to remain neutral, but "in order to keep the Cherokee Nation united, he signed a treaty of alliance with the Confederate government on October 7, 1861." After the war, John Ross was re-elected chief, though he died in Washington D.C. while trying to negotiate new treaties for the tribe. In 1907 Oklahoma became a state.⁷¹

Photographs of the Domestic Sphere

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Euro-American middle class women were dominated by a society that adhered to a strict code of conduct of the Victorian value system. Women were expected to stay within the domestic or private sphere while men were expected to participate and work in the public sphere outside the home. It might surprise some, but wealthy Cherokee women were living within these same Victorian social structures and values. Photography fit well within these parameters since photographers worked indoors and photographed the domestic sphere, making this a perfectly acceptable career for Benedicte Wrensted and a perfectly acceptable hobby for Jennie Ross Cobb.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 196-8.

⁷¹ Ibid. pp. 197.

Many of Cobb's photographs also fit directly into a domestic theme. Her photographs depict a sense of calm and tranquility, which fit in the Victorian mold. Cobb has photographs capturing images of children in long, white Victorian dresses and white bonnets, and women in the fashionable high neck, long sleeved shirts of the time, with their hair in the fashionable and popular Gibson Girl style standing in front of large mansions, with well manicured lawns surrounding the buildings. These women and children not only depict a Victorian lifestyle, but they also look like their Victorian Euro-American counterparts.

Also included in her domestic themed photography are pictures of both the inside and outside of her home, as pictured below. The grand mansion standing in the middle of the well-kept lawn, one picture captures her brother on horseback in front of the wide, pillared porch. The inside shots show a Victorian style parlor. A large fireplace with a velvet setae in front of it, the fireplace mantel covered in candles and a painting hanging above the fireplace mantel. Another shows the grand dining room. A staircase can be seen to the left with the dining table in the center of the photograph, sideboard and buffet against the wall. These photographs

exemplify the comfortable lifestyle Cobb and her family were living.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *George M. Murrell House*, about 1896, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1594322/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *Robert Bruce Ross Jr.*, about 1896, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1596757/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *Inside George M. Murrell House*, about 1896, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1596463/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.

This is not so different from the photographs Wrensted took for her Euro-American clients called parlor portraits. These parlor portraits seem to have been a popular photograph for the Euro-Americans townspeople of Pocatello. The setting of these photographs was exactly what one would expect, a parlor room. These images captured the family's cultural life, leisure, and gentility. Props in the photographs include items that exemplify their comfortable middle class lifestyle. This lifestyle would have differed from the Shoshone Bannock living on the Fort Hall Reservation, and were status symbols for the middle class Euro-American families in the area.

In one such photograph, Wrensted captured five Euro-American people in a parlor setting. On the left standing behind a desk was a well-dressed George W. Derr sharing a magazine with his wife, Estelle Potter Leonard Derr who was seated. In the center of the photograph is Elizabeth Potter, wearing a black dress in the latest fashion, holding a book in her lap. To the right was E.O. Leonard sitting on piano bench with his left arm placed near the piano keys. Seated closer to the camera on the right was Sarah Potter Cook.



Benedicte Wrensted, *Parlor Portrait*, 1901, Smithsonian Institute, National Anthropological Archives, Eugene O. Leonard Collection, Washington D.C., <https://aisri.indiana.edu/scherer/Wrensted/biography-history.htm>.

All five were dressed in well-made clothes of the latest fashion. The piano, the book, the paintings behind the sitters, the furniture, the family portraits on the wall to the right, and even the electric lighting were all symbols of their middle class lifestyle. Their well to do status and prominence in the community were being put on display with this photograph. Their upright posture gives them an important air, and the matriarch of the family was seated in the direct center of the photograph directly under the lights hanging from the ceiling. These were important people and an important family in the community and the photograph illustrates this.

If one looked strictly at Wrensted's photographs it could be assumed this is an Euro-American trend. Cobb's interior photographs show that for wealthy Indigenous people their home was an important status symbol as well. Not only do these interior photographs show the status of the Ross family, but they show the family's unusually wealthy status. Few in the Cherokee nation could afford a home with separate spaces for solely eating and sitting.⁷² This shows that when an Indigenous family could afford such a home, they wanted to photograph their status symbols as much as Euro-Americans.

Photographs of Social Life and Education

Education and social events were important to Cobb. She seems to have delighted in taking photographs of her classmates. She rarely had her classmates pose for her pictures, and often took photographs in transit from the school to the nearby town. In this way, her photographs have movement not seen in Gay or Wrensted's photographs. The young women/students of the Cherokee Female Seminary were captured in a more ordinary way: in mid laugh or mid glance. In one photograph the young women were walking on a wooden sidewalk to town. The viewer can easily see that the women were caught in motion, and the two in front were in conversation. The one on the right had her head tilted to the woman on her left. The dress on the woman on the left was flowing out to the left as the woman walked showing movement and the scene was natural and normal.

⁷² Ibid. pp. 208-09.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *Cherokee Female Seminary*, 1902, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/OHSPC/browse/?q=jennie+ross+cobb&t=fulltext&sort=>.

The Victorian clothing the women were wearing was not an unusual way for them to dress. The Cherokee Female Seminary modeled itself after a Euro-American school in Massachusetts, Mount Holyoke College. The women received a classical Euro-American education in Latin, mathematics, English and literature, and geography for primary through secondary students. They were not encouraged to pursue careers in these fields, but rather these fields were supposed to train them to become dutiful wives to prominent members of the Cherokee Nation. Unlike Federal boarding schools, the girls were free to come and go and could take leaves of absence from the school. It was also an institution for the wealthy and elite daughters of the Cherokee Nation.⁷³

In her school photographs Cobb was once again portraying her Cherokee community in a similar way to wealthy Euro-Americans. In Wrensted and Gay's photographs a much more "traditional" view of Indigenous peoples are being captured. In Gay's photographs assimilation was captured to show its positive affects. In Cobb's photographs it is clear that in some cases assimilation was not necessary as Indigenous people were already dressing,

⁷³ Ibid. pp. 214.

speaking, and being educated in the same way as the Euro-Americans. This was in direct opposition to Edward S. Curtis and others like him who pushed the vanishing race myth. Instead Cobb portrayed Indigenous peoples as adapting and partaking in Euro-American culture. They were not disappearing, but rather taking their Euro-American education to become better wives for the Cherokee men. Even the elite Cherokee who seem to have taken on so much of Euro-American culture still mean for their daughters to marry back into the Cherokee Nation, not outside of it.

However much the women were encouraged to become wives, the school and their education still gave women the second choice of some sort of career, such as a teacher. Before she married her husband, Cobb herself became a teacher. Cobb snapped two pictures on her graduation day.⁷⁴ These photographs could be seen as an attempt by Cobb to pose her subjects, but they were still more informal in their posing than if they had been in a studio. In the first photograph the group of graduating women stood at the boundary of the school grounds. Perhaps Cobb was trying to show how they were moving forward from the school into the world beyond. The second photograph shows the women walking away from the school, and this too could perhaps be Cobb's way of metaphorically showing the women starting their new lives after school: moving into adulthood.

Jennie Ross Cobb photographed her friends frequently, and she and her friends flip the narrative on what it meant to be an Indigenous woman. As art historian Nicole Strathman states, they “flaunted their independence for the camera, and were fashionable, self-assured, confident carriers of two nations.”⁷⁵ They were not hiding their faces, there was no fear of the camera, and although a myth persists that Indigenous people believed the camera would steal

⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 215.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 223.

their soul, these young men and women clearly did not have this trepidation around being photographed. In fact they seemed perfectly comfortable having their pictures taken.

In one picture Cobb captures her friends having a leisurely picnic. No one was posed in the photograph, and the four people in the photograph were close to the camera sitting on a fence. There is grass all around them, and a group of trees can be seen in the background. They were a group of fashionable young adults spending a summer day in leisure not so unlike their Euro-American counterparts. As stated above, they carried two nations, their Cherokee heritage, but also the Euro-American culture they had adapted or adopted as their own.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *Summer Picnic*, about 1906, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1596492/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.

Unlike photographs taken from non-Indigenous photographers at the time Cobb shows her sitters in contemporary clothing and living contemporary lives. As America Meredith a member of the Cherokee states, “Cobb’s photographs stand in stark contrast to the photographs of American Indians by non-Native photographers of her era. Her sitters are casual and wear fashionable clothing of the day, as they go about their daily activities, smiling. While many Native people of the time wore Western clothing, they were seldom depicted this way.”⁷⁶ Euro-American photographers often pictured Indigenous sitters in what they believe an Indigenous person should have looked like. However, Cobb was showing the Indigenous people of her community exactly as they were, not how someone else thought they were or should have looked.

Since Cobb was not a professional, the people featured in her photograph were posed in a group, rather than posed for the best visual effect. Meredith states, “Cobb’s works, primarily portrait and architectural photographs, draw the viewer’s gaze through unusual compositions of receding space.”⁷⁷ In the graduation photograph, the women were clustered to one side, and the eye is drawn away from them toward the imposing building of the seminary in the background. The spindly trees seem to frame the building, which further catches the viewer’s eye, and takes the focus away from the graduating women to the school building. Whether or not Cobb meant to highlight the building is not known, but the building and the school was a point of pride for the Cherokee Nation.

⁷⁶ America Meredith. “Jennie Ross Cobb: Cherokee Female Seminary Graduating Class, 1902.” *The Hearts of Our People*. (University of Washington Press, 2019), pp. 115.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 115.



Jennie Ross Cobb, *Cherokee Female Seminary Graduates*, 1902, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1596533/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.

The seminary school was the first school for women west of the Mississippi River. The Cherokee Nation not only had seminaries for men and women, but the tribe also established a free and compulsory public school. These schools were located throughout Oklahoma and the Cherokee Nation. Historian Grant Foreman wrote, “The Cherokee Nation had a better common school system than either Arkansas or Missouri.”⁷⁸ Clearly, school and education were a point of pride for the Cherokee Nation. These schools were also connected to the Cherokee Nation rather than the government. In this way, students would gain their education without the trauma of being separated from their family and Cherokee culture. Cobb captured both the graduates, but also the school building that provided her and her classmates an education. This illustrates how Cobb took photographs of buildings that directly related to her life.

Cobb photographed the school where she worked; capturing the importance education and Cherokee education held for her. A one-room schoolhouse in Christie, a rural town east of

⁷⁸ Nichole Dawn Strathman. Quote by Grant Foreman. “Through Native Lenses: American Indian Vernacular Photographies and Performances of Memories, 1890-1940.” *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. 2013. pp. 115.

Tahlequah became Cobb's new home from 1902 until her marriage in 1905. The school was named Owen School, and was named after the Cherokee politician Robert L. Owen. It seems Cobb was excited for her new job, as she took a picture of the schoolhouse and schoolchildren lined up outside the building. The students look relaxed and were dressed casually in front of small, squat building made of wood. In this photograph, like the graduation photograph, the building is what catches the eye, while the children are smaller and harder to see. However, this building and the photograph of it is important, as it shows a Cherokee school with Cherokee children being taught by a Cherokee teacher. This school was the Cherokee Nation's, not a government-run boarding school.



Jennie Ross Cobb Collection, *Schoolhouse*, about 1906, photograph, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1596701/?q=jennie%20ross%20cobb>.

In photographs of federal boarding schools at this time, children were often photographed in uniforms and in rigid postures. These schools focused on “discipline, labor, and group cohesion.”⁷⁹ The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs opened the first boarding school for Indigenous children in 1860. The schools were opened as a means to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-American culture. To do so, children were taken away from their families, their tribes, and their culture. These boarding schools isolated children from their Indigenous communities and enforced, often in a strict manner, Euro-American customs regarding food, hairstyle, language, and clothing. The children were forbidden from practicing their Indigenous spiritual beliefs or speaking their Indigenous language. Children of all ages were educated in these schools, and they were from many different tribes. Girls would learn domestic skills while boys had industrial and agricultural training. The schools were often a harsh environment to live in, and this environment often “contributed to poor health and was particularly well suited to the spread of communicable disease.”⁸⁰ Instead of sending their children to these school, the Cherokee Nation built their own schools, and this was where Cobb worked and what she photographed.

The school gave Cobb a career, but it also gave an education to Cherokee children without having to leave the Cherokee Nation. They were able to continue to live with their families, continue their Cherokee cultural and spiritual beliefs, and speak their language. What is noticeable about the children in Cobb’s photograph is that the children were in Euro-American clothing. They may not have been wearing uniforms, but they were wearing contemporary clothes Euro-American children would also wear to school. The Cherokee

⁷⁹ Nicole Dawn Strathman. “Through Native Lenses: American Indian Vernacular Photographies and Performances of Memories, 1890-1940.” *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. 2013. pp. 226.

⁸⁰ Rachele E. Wilbur, Steven M. Corbett, Jeanne A. Drisko. “Tuberculosis morbidity at Haskell Institute, a Native American Youth Boarding School 1910-1940.” *Annals of Anthropological Practice*. Vol. 40, 2016. pp. 1.

selectively adopted aspects of Euro-American culture, however, as their educational institutions show, they remained autonomous in their decisions.

An amazing aspect of the schools is that children were taught in both English and Cherokee with a ninety percent literacy rate. For Cobb, this photograph is not only showing an excitement and pride in her job; it is also showing her pride in the children and their accomplishments. These Cherokee children taught by a Cherokee teacher could learn to read and write and be productive within the Cherokee Nation, and without the interference of the boarding schools that stripped the children of their Cherokee identity. The Cherokee community and Cobb would have looked at this photograph of a Cherokee school, serving Cherokee children with pride.

Analyzing Indigenous self-representation in art is important to understanding cultural identity, and in studying Cobb's photography one gets a glimpse into the culture of the early twentieth century Cherokee community in which she lived. This was not an outsider's view of the Cherokee Nation. There were no props or gimmicks to symbolize stereotypical "Indianness." Instead, the photographs show Cherokee people as people who could adopt Euro-American dress, graduate from seminary school, or walk to the city to shop while still remaining Cherokee. Cobb gives those in her photographs humanity; there is nothing "other" about those pictured, and in many photographs if the viewer did not know those pictured were Cherokee they could be easily mistaken for Euro-Americans.

Unlike Jane Gay who believed the Nez Perce docile, and childlike, Cobb portrayed her community as one filled with intelligent and "progressive" people just like her. Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi a member of the Alutiiq states, "Understanding Indigenous art requires more than simply looking at works of art for their formal qualities. It is important to understand the

whole context of making and using. Understanding also requires recognizing that art objects are more than just material things that are seen. They are experienced and have weight.”⁸¹

Cobb was photographing her experiences, her communities experiences, and this is important, because it challenges the stereotypes white photographers of this time period were capturing in their photographs. Cobb captured a community that was not vanishing or lacking in intelligence.

The photograph of the school building might not at first glance seem like much, but that building symbolized how the Cherokee Nation took Euro-American education and made it their own. This building shows how the Cherokee fought against the federal boarding schools, and the removal of their children, and the children’s removal from their culture and family. They built an educational system on Cherokee land that taught children both English and Cherokee, that kept them with their family and within their culture. Cobb captured not just a one-room building with a few schoolchildren standing in front of it, but a symbol of resistance, adaption, and pride. This was something Cobb herself was a part of. She was not removed from the community, or an outsider looking in like Wrensted and Gay. Instead, this was a part of her life and culture.

Cobb’s photographs were capturing Indigenous culture in the early twentieth century, and the way of life for wealthy Cherokee. She was able to illustrate how “Indigenous art forms can communicate many aspects of culture at once, such as acts of daily life; connections between people, place, and seasonal cycles; cultural experiences; and expressions of our way of life”⁸² They were photographs that show the resilient adaptations and lives of

⁸¹ Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi. “Art as a Container for Culture.” *Hearts of Our People*. (University of Washington Press, 2019) pp. 157.

⁸² Ibid. 161.

Indigenous nations in the United States, and have and will continue to be passed down as cultural evidence to continuing generations.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have offered a critical overview of how white women photographers of the American West and Indigenous photographer Jennie Ross Cobb interacted with and used photography to capture images of Indigenous peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In exploring how three different women performed photography, and how Indigenous peoples performed as photographic subjects and as photographers, I have argued that there is no single way a woman used photography, nor is there one single way Indigenous peoples experienced photography. Instead, I have shown there are multiple ways in which women interacted with photography, and multiple ways in which Indigenous peoples interacted with photography as those being captured in an image and as photographers themselves. I have argued that Indigenous people have more autonomy than they may at first appear to, and that they had the same reasons to have their photographs taken as Euro-Americans. I have also shown how photography can be a respectable, acceptable, and fulfilling career for a nineteenth century woman.

Photography has been a way for a woman to live an independent life with a career still acceptable to Victorian standards and as an acceptable hobby. Whether professional or amateur, women have captured history unfold. Capturing the Dawes Act in motion, creating images for Indigenous clients, and snapping candid shots of a wealthy Indigenous community, women have been creating a visual history and their own visual history among Indigenous communities. While some Indigenous peoples were paying customers who wanted their photographs taken for a myriad of reasons at the time, others now see the photographs differently from their original purpose. Either way, how women photographed Indigenous

peoples and how Indigenous peoples interacted with women photographers has shown to be an important and overlooked area of study.

Benedicte Wrensted:

Benedicte Wrensted was able to build a career in photography that allowed her to be the main breadwinner of her family unit. Photography enabled her to look after her elderly mother, and take in her niece, Ella, as an apprentice. She was also one of the only photographers of the late nineteenth century to photograph the Shoshone Bannock. As we have seen, she took Indigenous photographs, because the Shoshone Bannock were paying customers. Wrensted was in the business of making portraits. She was not an anthropologist or a government employee seeking to capture assimilation or spin Indigenous life a certain way. Instead, she was simply taking photographs of paying customers in the same way she did for her Euro-American customers. She took pictures to make a living.

However, it is also true that Wrensted still used props in her studio to symbolize when her photographic subjects were Indigenous. Through the use of certain blankets Wrensted crafted portraits that would later become stereotypical Native American photographs. These photographs would lose their attachment to the sitter and to their photographer. The Indigenous person within the photograph and the women behind the lens would both be forgotten. No matter the intentions of the sitter or photographer when the image was first created, some of Wrensted's Indigenous photography took on an exploitative nature for later generations. This shows what can happen to photographs after they have been taken. They do not always stay with the person who paid for them or who created them.

Wrensted's Indigenous customers wanted life transitions and events documented, along with family photographs and even photographs taken simply for fun. In some ways they

do differ from their Euro-American counterparts in style and composition. Indigenous peoples were usually standing proudly, looking directly at the camera, unlike Euro-Americans who were often photographed sitting or looking slightly away from the camera lens. While some Indigenous people are pictured in Euro-American clothing, others wore more “traditional” clothes. Parlor photographs were common among Euro-Americans. The parlor being an important part of a Euro-American home that held status symbols of their class. This does not seem to be the case for the Shoshone Bannock who went to Wrensted’s studio rather than have Wrensted come to them.

Wrensted captures the history of Pocatello and of the Shoshone Bannock of the Fort Hall Reservation. In doing so, she captured images of a people who knew what photography was, and had their own reasons for wanting their photographs taken. The Shoshone Bannock had autonomy in Wrensted’s studio, and her photographs have allowed future generations of Shoshone Bannock memories of their relatives and of the Shoshone Bannock’s resilience.

E. Jane Gay

E. Jane Gay took photographs of the Nez Perce to show how well assimilation and the Dawes Act was progressing. She was not a professional photographer or hired by the government in an official capacity, but instead chose to travel with Alice Fletcher trying to legitimize Fletcher’s job by capturing her work in action. As seen in Gay’s letters, she believed the Nez Perce were docile, childlike people who needed the guidance of Euro-Americans to have better lives. Led by beliefs of Nez Perce inferiority, Gay used the privilege she was given in her capacity as photographer to infantilize and oppress the Nez Perce tribal members.

However, the Nez Perce were not the docile people Gay believed them to be. They knew the Dawes Allotment Act would reduce their land holdings and subvert their sovereignty. Chief Joseph never agreed to allotment, and even Fletcher's interpreter would use the knowledge he gained working for her to undermine assimilation acts later in life. Gay may have believed she was capturing an assimilated people; she was in reality capturing a resilient people during a tragic transition in their lives.

As mentioned, many Nez Perce today see Gay's photographs as reminders of how strong and resilient the Nez Perce people are. While the allotment was a tragic moment in the history of the Nez Perce people, they survived, adapted, and are still doing so today. Gay did not even realize that she was capturing the history of the survival of the Nez Perce along with the history of the Dawes Act. Photographing them in Euro-American clothing, in front of Euro-American log cabins, and attending church may have seemed to her solid proof of assimilation, but it was also proof of adaptation and survival. Gay was not immune to Idaho's landscape, and would retire in England at a home she called Kamiah after the landscape she captured through photography.

Jennie Ross Cobb

Jennie Ross Cobb was a Cherokee woman who took up photography as a hobby. In so doing, she captured a wealthy Cherokee community in her candid photographs. Cobb is an important figure among this study, as she provides self-representation lest anyone believe only white women were becoming photographers and capturing images of Indigenous peoples. Cobb took photographs of her community and the people she interacted with on a daily basis, creating images of everyday life: A life that did not look much different from that

of wealthy Euro-Americans. Young people heading to the city to shop, enjoying a picnic, and graduating from school.

Cobb photographed a point of pride for the Cherokee Nations: the schoolhouse. In response to federal boarding schools and separating their children from their Cherokee culture and families, the Cherokee Nation developed their own educational system, and Cobb was a part of that. She photographed the building she taught in, and highlighted a Cherokee woman teaching Cherokee children without the trauma of separation of family and culture. Adapting to the Euro-American education, the Cherokee developed their own way to facilitate that educational experience, and Cobb captured that pride and accomplishment in her photographs.

The photographs of buildings and her own home capture the lifestyle of the Cherokee community Cobb called home. Here are the parlor pictures Wrensted did not take. The status symbols within the photograph showing Indigenous peoples had become a part of the middle class. They too had become successful in their own way with adapting, but not becoming Euro-Americans. In the end, Cobb's photographs would help her restore her family home, and become the museum's first curator.

Future Indigenous Photography

Today, a new generation of Indigenous photographers have taken over from Cobb and her contemporaries. Wanting to self-represent Indigenous people of this generation in photographs and visual culture. One such photographer is Matika Wilbur a Swinomish/Tulalip photographer. Her Project 562 "echoes Edward Curtis's epic western photographic expeditions but reverses his 'salvage' visual archive of Native peoples. Instead Wilbur is traveling to Native communities across the country to photograph citizens of each federally recognized nation in order to celebrate the continuing vitality and diversity of Native

peoples.”⁸³ Dispelling stereotypes and myths her project seeks to be a platform to honor the legacy of Indigenous peoples.

Many Indigenous artists are “reframing relationships between category and convention, between aesthetics and activism, between tradition and innovation. To build relationships with multiple audiences, from local to international from Indigenous to non – Indigenous.”⁸⁴ Visual culture is not only a way to preserve history, but to visually bridge gaps between different peoples, and Indigenous artists are doing just that through their art. Jennie Ross Cobb’s images show her community, and now further Indigenous generations are showcasing their own communities for all to see. As Matika Wilbur states, “the time of sharing, building cultural bridges, abolishing racism, and honoring the legacy that this country is built upon is among us.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Susan Bernardin. “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Indigenous Wests: Literary and Visual Aesthetics. *Western American Literature*. University of Nebraska Press. 2009. pp. 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid. pp. 6.

⁸⁵ Matika Wilbur. Project 562. <http://www.project562.com/about/>.

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