

# FARMERS WARRIORS TRADERS

## *A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women*

Priscilla K. Buffalohead

UNTIL RECENTLY in American history the only women from native or tribal cultures who mattered were those whose influences on past events were too important to ignore or those whose lives provided anecdotal filler in historical scenes both great and small, in which men were the primary actors. While this orientation is beginning to change as a result of a growing interest in the history of women, contributions of women in tribal cultures remains a much neglected field of study. This neglect may stem from a general ignorance of historians and other scholars, an ignorance fostered by the unquestioned acceptance of ethnocentric notions that modern America somehow represents the pinnacle of civilization and that tribal cultures are but relics of an ancient age. Unfortunately, all too many feminist scholars wear the same ethnocentric blinders as their male counterparts, viewing the study of the history of tribal women as valuable only insofar as it illuminates the origins of sexism in human society.

Whether they realize it or not, feminist scholars dealing with the history of Euro-American women become caught up in issues of sex equality precisely because they belong to what has always been a class-stratified society characterized by unequal access to power, prestige, and privilege. Many tribal societies, on the other hand, stem from egalitarian cultural traditions. These traditions are

concerned less with equality of the sexes and more with the dignity of individuals and with their inherent right — whether they be women, men, or children — to make their own choices and decisions. Clearly, then, issues associated with the status of women in stratified societies may be somewhat different from those in egalitarian societies. With these differences in mind, we can compare the two if we treat egalitarian societies as viable alternative systems rather than as relics of an ancient past.

TO UNDERSTAND the dimensions of women's status in the historical culture of the Ojibway Indian people of Minnesota and the neighboring upper Great Lakes region, a critical evaluation of the information provided in primary and secondary historical sources is absolutely necessary. These sources, spanning the period from the mid-17th to the early 20th century, were written for the most part by men who represented the successive colonialist regimes of France, Great Britain, and America. Taken together, these sources provide biased and often contradictory images of native women as well as valuable insights into their lives. In much of the literature two pictures of Ojibway women can be found — one portraying them as drudges and slaves to men, the other depicting them in a far more dynamic role in the political, economic, and social life of their communities. The difficult task of sorting out these images and arriving at some semblance of truth demands not only an understanding of the major trends in Western thought about women, but also a thorough acquaintance with the history and culture of the Ojibway people.

In the mid-17th century, French explorers and mis-

*Priscilla Buffalohead, who holds a master's degree in anthropology, lectures at Augsburg College, where she currently teaches the course she developed entitled "Women: A Cross-Cultural Perspective." With her husband, Roger, she has just completed a history of the Mille Lacs Reservation to be published this summer.*

sionaries described at least some of the ancestors of the Ojibway as living in a large fishing village at the rapids of the St. Mary's River near what is now Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. These early accounts spoke of a people who lived in harmony with the cycle of the seasons. Summer village life depended on fishing, hunting game, gathering wild plant foods, and planting small fields of corn. In late fall and winter, village residents dispersed into smaller family or band units to pursue large game and to trap or snare fur-bearing animals. While early sources were silent on the specialized harvests of maple sap and wild rice, these resources played a major role in Ojibway economic life in later years.<sup>1</sup>

In the 18th century, with the exception of those who moved into southern Ontario and the lower peninsula of Michigan, the Ojibway migrated westward. Some established villages along the north shore of Lake Superior and eventually moved into the interior of northern Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The main body, however, migrated along the southern shore of the lake, establishing villages at Keeweenaw and Chequamegon bays on the upper peninsulas of Michigan and Wisconsin, respectively. This group eventually moved into the interior of northern Wisconsin, Minnesota, and, by the 19th century, the eastern fringes of North Dakota. Despite an unsettled period of migration and intermittent warfare with the Fox and Minnesota Dakota, traditional Ojibway economic life remained remarkably intact. While intensifying their search for fur-bearing animals to trade for European manufactured goods, the Ojibway continued to make a living by hunting, fishing, gathering, and corn planting.<sup>2</sup>

Scattered references in the historical record on the role of women in the Ojibway subsistence economy noted with some frequency that women did a great deal of the hard and heavy work. Some observers began to fashion an image of the women as burden bearers, drudges, and virtual slaves to men, doing much of the work but being barred from participation in the seemingly more important and flamboyant world of male hunters, chiefs, and warriors. This image is fostered in the published work of the Reverend Peter Jones, a Mis-



*WEAVING* patterns into a rush mat in the shade of a bark lodge, about 1900

sasauga Ojibway and Christian missionary to his people in western Ontario during the mid-19th century. "In accordance with the custom of all pagan nations," he stated, "the Indian men look upon their women as an inferior race of beings, created for their use and convenience. They therefore tend to treat them as menials, and impose on them all the drudgeries of a savage life, such as making the wigwam, providing fuel, planting and hoeing the Indian corn or maize, fetching the venison

*PARCHING* wild rice on birch-bark sheets at White Earth Reservation, about 1910



<sup>1</sup> Emma H. Blair, ed., *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, 1:109, 275-277 (Cleveland, 1911); Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., "Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791," in *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Iroquois, Ottawas, Lower Canada*, 54:129-133 (Cleveland, 1899); Albert E. Jenks, "Wild Rice Gatherers of the Upper Lakes," in Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), *19th Annual Report*, part 2, p. 1013-1137 (Washington, D.C., 1898).

<sup>2</sup> Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:275-277; Ojibwe Curriculum Committee, *The Land of the Ojibwe*, 4, 5, 8-11 (Minnesota Historical Society, *The Ojibwe: A History Resource Unit* — St. Paul, 1973).

and bear's meat from the woods where the man shot it; in short, all the hard work falls upon the women; so that it may be truly said of them, that they are the slaves of their husbands."<sup>3</sup>

While these comments may accurately describe a portion of women's many economic roles, they greatly distort the status of women in the traditional Ojibway culture. This image might be taken more seriously were it not that 19th-century writers very frequently made this kind of statement about women from a wide variety of American Indian cultures. Even among the Iroquois of New York, where women traditionally had the right to nominate and recall civil chiefs in political affairs, to manage and direct the lives of their families, to divorce, and to determine how many children they would raise, the 19th-century ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan concluded that they occupied a position inferior to men because they worked very hard planting and harvesting extensive fields of corn and the men showed them no deference.<sup>4</sup>

American Indian women appeared exploited to many 19th-century writers if only because their ideal of woman, fostered by the privileged classes of Europe and America, was a frail, dependent person in need of protection. These writers may not have known consciously that their image was based upon the premise that women should be shown deference precisely because they were biological and intellectual inferiors of men. Other writers may also have deliberately promoted the notion that native women were exploited and mistreated to justify policies forcing Indians to adopt the religion and life style of Euro-American society.<sup>5</sup> Laden with the bias of the superiority of their own culture's traditions, observers failed to comprehend the full range of women's economic roles, the extent to which Ojibway women managed and directed their own activities, and perhaps most importantly, the extent to which women held ownership and distribution rights to the things they produced and processed. It is only when women's duties are seen in relation to women's rights that the over-all status of women in Ojibway history can be understood. That men in Ojibway and other tribal cultures did not show their women deference did not in itself mean that they saw women as inferior beings.

LIKE MANY if not most cultures throughout the world, the Ojibway believed that certain tasks were more appropriate for men and others for women. Hunting and trapping, for example, were ideally the male domain, and first-kill feasts honored only boys for their role as hunters. Gathering wild plant foods and gardening, on the other hand, belonged to the female domain. Yet to a large extent, domains overlapped, so that women and men often worked together, having separate duties in the same general activity. In canoe building, for exam-



A COUPLE shared the job of sewing canoe gunwales with spruce root at Mille Lacs, about 1940.

ple, men fashioned the frame of the birch-bark canoe and made the paddles while the women sewed bark to the frame with spruce roots and applied the pitch or gum to the sewn areas to create a watertight vessel.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, while an activity might be defined as male or female dominated, in actuality women and men worked side by side in mutually dependent roles. Even hunting, particularly the winter hunt, invariably included women because "women's work" was an essential part of it. Women built the lodges, spotted the game, butchered the meat; they processed the hides to be fashioned into clothing and footwear and the furs to be either trade items or robes and bedding, and dried the meat for future use.<sup>7</sup>

Women dominated the activities associated with the specialized harvests of maple sap and wild rice and the gathering of other wild plant foods. The trader, Alexander Henry the elder, who in 1763 lived for a time with an Ojibway family in northern Michigan, provided one of

<sup>3</sup>Jones, *History of the Ojibway Indians*, 60 (London, 1861). The same argument can be found in Joseph Gilfillan, "The Ojibways in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:58, 83 (St. Paul, 1901) and William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 265 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1957).

<sup>4</sup>Judith K. Brown, "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note," in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, 237, 239-241 (New York, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>For a description of 19th-century attitudes, see Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States*, 161 (New York, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 121 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1979); Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, 319 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1959).

<sup>7</sup>Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776*, 201 (New York, 1809); Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 121.



the earliest descriptions of the maple-sap harvest. In his journal Henry discussed the extent to which families depended upon this seasonal resource for survival. He also left no doubt that the harvest was a female responsibility. "Arrived here," he noted, "we turned our attention to sugar-making, the management of which belongs to the women." Likewise William Whipple Warren, the 19th-century Ojibway historian, described the wild-rice harvest as women's work. "Their hard work . . . again commences in the autumn, when wild rice which abounds in many of the northern lakes, becomes ripe and fit to gather. Then, for a month or more, they are busied in laying in a winter supply."<sup>8</sup>

Women also managed the planting and harvesting of small fields of corn, pumpkins, and squash. In the late 19th century American government agents and missionaries pursued a uniform policy of making farmers out of all Indian people. Ojibway women, who still assumed the major responsibility for planting and harvesting the gardens, then added stockraising to their provider skills. Government agents may have been surprised at times that many of the women readily accepted some white concepts of farming. In 1916, one issue of the *Red Lake News* reported, "Sophia Chaboyea deserves a great deal of credit for her activities in farming. She now has four milch cows, and finds a ready market for all the milk she gets. She also cares for three horses, four hogs, and

<sup>8</sup>Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 68–70, 149; Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 186, 265.

<sup>9</sup>*Red Lake News*, April 1, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Thwaites, ed., in *Jesuit Relations*, 54:129–133; Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:275; Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 154; Gilfillan, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:80.

<sup>11</sup>Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 28, 29, 39–44, 123, 128.

*TENDING the fire under the sap kettles in a small clearing near Mille Lacs Lake, 1902*



*WOMEN smoked and scraped buckskins while a man (left background) cut firewood, about 1900.*

about forty chickens. During the summer she farms . . . five acres of land and puts up all the hay for the stock. It would be encouraging if a number of 'around town men' would pattern after her and get busy."<sup>9</sup>

Both sexes shared in fishing, which at certain seasons of the year was as important as hunting in the Ojibway round of subsistence. Each, however, appears to have had specialized fishing techniques. Men used the hook and line, spears, and dip nets while the women fished with nets. Observers in the 19th century portrayed women as responsible for bringing in the bulk of the fish that were used over the long winter months. The women made their own fish nets out of nettle stalk fiber and, in later years, out of twine they obtained from traders.<sup>10</sup>

WOMEN'S LABOR figured prominently in the process of transforming raw food and other resources into valued goods. The women butchered, roasted, and dried the game, waterfowl, and fish. They dried wild plant foods, made sap into maple sugar, and dried and stored corn and wild rice for future needs. Women also did most of the cooking that took place in and around the lodge. They decided when to cook and what portions each family member would receive. They cooked co-operatively for communal feasts and served the food.<sup>11</sup>

While male hunters provided the animal hides used in clothing, the women tanned the hides and sewed dresses, shirts, leggings, and moccasins for their families. They fashioned furs into blankets and used rabbit fur in cradleboards and in the interior of children's moccasins. The women were in fact innovators, blending tra-

ditional clothing concepts with new materials. They customarily used shells, porcupine quills, and paint to ornament clothing. When European trade goods were introduced, however, the women gradually added the use of trader's cloth, blankets, and glass or porcelain beads to create new styles of dress. The final products of women's labor, including food and manufactured goods, were important economic resources, essential not only in family life but also in trade and for gift exchanges among families, bands, and tribal groups.<sup>12</sup>

Women clearly managed and directed their own activities. The men who helped did not oversee the women but played assisting roles. In rare descriptions of women's labor, the workers hardly acted as if they were "virtual slaves." Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the Indian agent at Sault Ste. Marie during the 1820s and 1830s, described corn planting in the following manner: "In the spring the cornfield is planted by her [the hunter's wife] and youngsters in a vein of gaiety and frolic. It is done in a few hours, and taken care of in the same spirit. It is perfectly voluntary labour and she would not be scolded for omitting it." Schoolcraft described the late summer harvest as accompanied with the same festive atmosphere.<sup>13</sup>

Although it appears Ojibway women were not coerced by men to perform much of the hard and heavy work of making a living, it might still be argued that they were exploited if the men maintained the ownership and distribution rights over whatever women produced. These rights are difficult to ascertain from primary source materials, but the journals kept by some fur traders in the Great Lakes area suggest that women came in to trade nearly as often as men. Traders frequently negotiated directly with Ojibway women for their wattap (used in repairing canoes), wild rice, and maple sugar. Schoolcraft, writing about the corn harvest, provided further evidence of the rights of women over their own produce: "A good Indian housewife deems this a part of her prerogative, and prides herself to have a store of corn to exercise her hospitality . . . in the entertainment of lodge guests."<sup>14</sup>

Even in the male-dominated spheres of hunting and trapping where women only processed material, it appears that they may have had some ownership and distribution rights. Documentation of these rights is crucial to an understanding of women's status in hunting societies. Some leading anthropologists have concluded that, because game was the group's most valuable resource, men as the hunters and distributors had methods of gaining community prestige not available to women.<sup>15</sup>

Evidence among the Ojibway suggests that women not only "fetched the venison and bear's meat from the woods" but also had a voice in determining who would receive the divided portions. In the late 17th century the French official Nicolas Perrot spoke of a custom com-

mon among the Great Lakes tribes whereby a young hunter brought his kill back to the lodge of his mother-in-law. She in turn distributed the meat, giving a large portion to the hunter's mother. Again in the mid-19th century, the German writer Johann Kohl reported that at Chequamegon Bay, "His [the hunter's] feeling of honour insists that he must first of all consult with his wife how the deer is to be divided among his neighbours and friends." And in households of more than one wife he noted: "The hunter also entrusts the game he has killed to her [the first wife] for distribution."<sup>16</sup>

Fur traders occasionally mentioned having to negoti-

<sup>12</sup> Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 30-33; Carrie A. Lyford, *The Crafts of the Ojibwa*, 129 (Office of Indian Affairs, *Indian Handicrafts Publication No. 5* — Phoenix, Ariz., 1943). For descriptions of women whose clothing blended traditional and new elements, see also McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour*, 182, 255, 315.

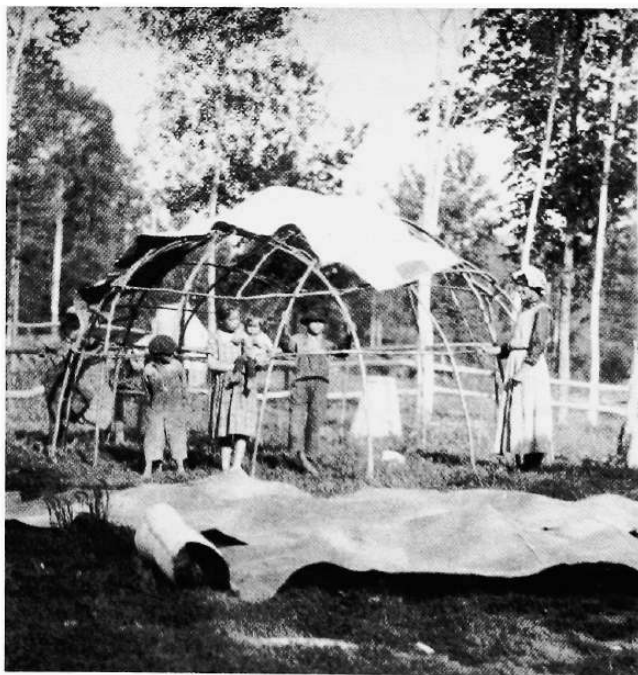
<sup>13</sup> Schoolcraft, *Archives of Aboriginal Knowledge*, 2:63 (Philadelphia, 1860).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Curot, "A Wisconsin Fur Trader's Journal, 1803-04," in Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 20:423, 427-429, 436, 437 (Madison, 1911); Schoolcraft, *The Indian in His Wigwam or Characteristics of the Red Race of America*, 179 (Buffalo, N.Y., 1848).

<sup>15</sup> Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View*, 21, 22 (New York, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:69; Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami, Wanderings Round Lake Superior*, 70, 111 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1956).

**YOUNG SPECTATORS** tested the frame of a birch-bark lodge in process, about 1925.



ate directly with Ojibway women to obtain the sought-after processed furs. Near his Pembina post in north-western Minnesota early in the 19th century, Alexander Henry the younger reported, "I went to the upper part of the Tongue river to meet a band of Indians returning from hunting beaver, and fought several battles with the women to get their furs from them. I was vexed at having been obligated to fight with the women." These intriguing fragments of information provide some evidence that women who processed resources had some ownership rights as well.<sup>17</sup>

In assessing women's status, the ownership and distribution rights they claimed to food and other resources should not be underestimated, particularly in a tribal culture such as the Ojibway where generous giving and sharing of valued goods was a major means of spreading one's influence. To the extent that these rights were recognized, Ojibway women seem far less exploited than, for example, women factory workers in a capitalist economic system.

IN THE SEASONAL round of family life, women were primarily responsible for building the lodges. Female family members often worked together to construct a winter wigwam. They cut saplings from the woods to form the lodge frame, covered it with rolled sheets of birch bark sewn together and with woven rush mats made anew each fall. Together, the women could construct a comfortable and inviting winter dwelling in a matter of a few hours. They not only built the lodges but were also considered to be the owners of the lodge and managers of the activities that took place in and around it. Schoolcraft spoke of women as household heads when he noted, "The lodge itself, with all its arrangements, is the precinct of the rule and government of the wife. She assigns each member, his or her ordinary place to sleep and put their effects. The husband has no voice in



A GRANDMOTHER posed about 1940 with rolls of split spruce roots for lashing birch bark to canoes.

the matter. The lodge is her precinct, the forest his."<sup>18</sup>

In the flow of family life, the ideal of mutual respect dominated the relationship between the sexes. As mothers, women assumed the full responsibility for their infant children until they were weaned. The mother determined when weaning should take place, and as the Ojibway believed in practicing sexual abstinence until children were weaned, the mother had some right to decide how many children she would bear. Statistics regarding family size are very sketchy until the late 19th century, but the available evidence suggests that two or three children constituted an average family. A high infant mortality rate, a lower fertility rate, longer periods of sexual abstinence, and the option of abortion may have contributed to this relatively small family size.<sup>19</sup>

As children grew older, fathers played an active role in caring for and raising sons, while mothers took the responsibility for raising daughters. Grandparents, who frequently lived in the lodge of their daughter or nearby, also were active in raising their grandchildren, sometimes shouldering the entire responsibility. Grandmothers were especially important as caretakers of infants and small children when parents were busy at other tasks. That this practice has some antiquity in Ojibway history is reflected in legends and stories of children living in the lodge of their grandparents.<sup>20</sup>

Marriage ties bound family groups together. The data on Ojibway marriage practices, however, do not

<sup>17</sup> Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson*, 1:239, 240 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1965); Curot, in *Collections of Wisconsin*, 20:412, 423, 427, 429, 436, 441, 462.

<sup>18</sup> Schoolcraft, *Indian in His Wigwam*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 48, 51; Schoolcraft, *Indian in His Wigwam*, 73; Martha Coleman Bray, ed., *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet: A Scientist on the Mississippi Headwaters with Notes on Indian Life*, 253 (St. Paul, 1970); Sister M. Inez Hilger, "Chippewa Child Life and Its Cultural Background," in *BAE, Bulletin*, 146:3, 10 (Washington, D.C., 1951). For descriptions of Ojibway families of varying sizes, see also Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers*, 248, 250, 303, 376, 380, 446 (Reprint ed., New York, 1978); McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour*, 255, 259.

<sup>20</sup> Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 34-38, 69 (New York, 1976); Hilger, in *BAE, Bulletin*, 146:56, 57, 168.



fit neatly into the structural model of society formulated by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who proposed a male-controlled exchange system in which women are considered as "objects" or "gifts" to be traded upon marriage. Among the Ojibway, mothers and grandmothers, playing key roles as "exchangers," frequently orchestrated first marriage arrangements for sons and daughters. John Tanner, a white captive who spent much of his youth and adult life with an Ojibway band whose territory included portions of northwestern Minnesota, became aware of the authority of women in marriage exchange when he attempted to find a wife on his own and was reprimanded by his foster mother. He recalled that "It was not the business of young men to bring home their wives. Here, said I, is our mother, whose business it is to find wives for us when we want them."<sup>21</sup>

The idea that marriage is an exchange of women also assumes that it is invariably women who leave the parental household to live with their husband's kin. In some cases young women did move to the locality of their husband's male relatives upon marriage. The custom considered preferable, however, was for the new husband to live with his wife's parents for two or more years. Called bride service, this custom was practiced among the Minnesota Ojibway and neighboring groups at least until the mid-19th century and probably later. While reasons for this preference are not explicitly stated, the resultant practice did afford the new wife's parents an opportunity to watch over their new son-in-law to insure that he would become a good hunter, husband, and father. Observance of bride service also gave the young wife an opportunity to be close to her own female kin upon the birth of her first child.<sup>22</sup>

Evidence concerning the extent to which young women had a say in first marriages that were arranged for them is conflicting at best. These women were not, however, bound by custom to accept the fate of a lifelong bad marriage. Women, as well as men, had the option of divorce, and the primary sources indicate that they exercised it. If, for example, a first husband proved to be a poor hunter, if he showed cruelty, or if he took another wife not to her liking, the wife could leave and marry again. The second or third marriage partner was more likely to be of the wife's own choosing.<sup>23</sup>

The obligations of a wife toward her husband's kin group and vice versa were most apparent in customs surrounding the death of a spouse. The widow observed a year of mourning. She allowed her hair to hang straight, she wore old clothes, and she carried a spirit bundle with her which she referred to as her husband. Into this bundle she put any new item she acquired over the year; at the proper time, the deceased husband's relatives took the bundle from her, distributed the contents among their kin, and dressed her in new clothes

symbolizing her freedom to marry again. In the event of the death of a wife, the husband carried a smaller spirit bundle and also observed a year of mourning.<sup>24</sup>

IT HAS generally been assumed, at least by most 20th-century scholars, popular novelists, and movie makers, that beyond the household level band and village affairs were invariably in the hands of male leaders or chiefs. This point of view ignores the fact that leadership had a wide variety of contexts in the yearly round of Ojibway life. Groups to be governed could be as small as a single family or berry-picking party or as large as intertribal war parties or the people who came together for village ceremonials. In general, men led male-oriented pursuits such as the hunt or a war party, while women leaders supervised activities within the female domain. There were occasions, however, when elderly women were chosen as spokespersons for hunting bands. These women managed the products of the hunt and negotiated deals with the traders.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, the argument that only men were the leaders or chiefs in Ojibway history ignores the ample evidence in the historic record that suggests agents from the colonial regimes of France, Great Britain, and America actively interfered with the traditional, more flexible leadership system of the Ojibway, creating male chiefs when they needed them to serve the economic and political interests of each regime.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, intriguing bits and pieces of information which have been virtually ignored by 20th-century scholars offer the possibility that women village chiefs appeared with more frequency in eastern North America than had previously been assumed. And as late as the 19th century, United States government sources named three Ojibway women as recognized leaders or chiefs of their bands: "The head chief of the Pillagers, Flatmouth,

<sup>21</sup> Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, 94 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1956). See also Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, 1969), especially 481, 496.

<sup>22</sup> Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:69; Schoolcraft, *Indian in His Wigwam*, 72; Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Hilger, in BAE, *Bulletin*, 146:161-163.

<sup>24</sup> Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:70; McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour*, 292; Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 78; Hilger, in BAE, *Bulletin*, 146:86; Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Harold Hickerson, ed., "The Journal of Charles Jean Baptiste Chaboillez, 1797-98," in *Ethnohistory*, 6:275, 299 (Summer, 1959); James, ed., *John Tanner*, 15. For more on images of Indians in popular media see Raymond W. Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman, Okla., 1982).

<sup>26</sup> Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, 139 (Toronto, 1974); McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour*, 460; Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, 244, 250; Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 66.

has for several years resided in Canada, his sister, Ruth Flatmouth, is in her brother's absence the acknowledged Queen, or leader of the Pillagers; two other women of hereditary right acted as leaders of their respective bands, and at the request of the chiefs were permitted to sign the agreements." In 1889 government negotiators apparently felt compelled to explain to Congress why women were permitted to sign official agreements. Women leaders appear not to have been a problem for the Ojibway but rather for the members of Euro-American society.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to leadership roles in political affairs, women held other specialized status positions in Ojibway history. Among the medico-religious specialists, medicine women played a prominent role. They not only treated illness in general but served the special medical needs of other women, particularly at childbirth. Medicine women were not just midwives, as most adult women knew how to assist in labor. They were called in when complications arose and were paid for their services as specialists. Medicine women were also consulted by women who wished to induce abortion or prevent a miscarriage. In the latter case, one medicine woman mixed certain herbs with lint and had her patient stand over the smoldering mixture. Knowledge of this cure came "to my sister and me from my mother, and she received it from her grandmother. Since no one but my sister and I have this knowledge, and we won't live much longer, it will die when we go; it belongs to our family."<sup>28</sup>

Direct historical evidence points to another specialized role played by a woman: that of prophet or shaman. In a small oval-shaped lodge, the prophet of the shaking tent could predict the future and determine the location of lost objects or missing persons by communicating with his or her guardian spirits. Blue Robed Cloud, who lived at Chequamegon Bay early in the 19th century, was such a prophet. She acquired her power in a youthful vision quest coincident with her first menstruation. In subsequent years, she used her gift of power to help

her people find game in times of great need. After her first success, she recalled to Schoolcraft in later years, "My reputation was established by this success, and I was afterwards noted in the art of a medicine woman, and sung the songs which I have given to you."<sup>29</sup>

As war captives, women played specialized roles in intertribal matters of war and peace. Those who had been taken as young girls and had eventually married into the enemy group were called upon to act as message carriers and peace mediators. Ojibway historian Warren mentioned one such woman who became the favorite wife of a Yankton Dakota chief. According to oral traditions, Shappa, head chief of the Yankton Dakota, sent his Ojibway wife on a "fleet horse" and with his "peace pipe" to arrange a peace between his people and the Ojibway of the Pembina band. The image of women as peacemakers between tribal groups appears in the oral traditions of other Ojibway bands as well.<sup>30</sup>

Oral tradition and primary sources provide evidence that some women became honored warriors, although men dominated that status position among the Ojibway. An account collected by Schoolcraft, for example, speaks of an unnamed woman who demonstrated unusual courage on the path of war against Iroquois enemies. In the mid-19th century, another woman warrior, whose name has been translated as Hanging Cloud Woman, of

*A GRAND PORTAGE Ojibway inside her lodge put the finishing touches on a basket, about 1940.*



<sup>27</sup> Christian F. Feest, "Virginia Algonquians," in Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Northeast*, 261 (William C. Sturtevant, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15 — Washington, D.C., 1978); Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., "The French Regime in Wisconsin — III," in *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 18:41 (Madison, 1908); William Henry Egle, ed., *Notes and Queries, Historical and Genealogical Chiefly Relating to Interior Pennsylvania*, 2:432-434, 460 (Reprint of 1st and 2nd series, Harrisburg, Pa., 1895); John Greer Varner and Jeanette Johnson Varner, eds., *The Florida of the Inca*, 297-326 (Austin, Tex., 1980); United States, 51 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 247, p. 26 (Washington, D.C., 1890 — serial 2747).

<sup>28</sup> Hilger, in *BAE, Bulletin*, 146:10-13.

<sup>29</sup> Schoolcraft, *Indian in His Wigwam*, 169-173.

<sup>30</sup> Warren, *History of the Ojibway Nation*, 358.



the Lac Courte Oreilles band in Wisconsin, became something of a legend among her people, according to three historical accounts. Hanging Cloud Woman was apparently a favorite daughter of her father. As a young woman, she accompanied him and her brother on a hunting expedition, where they were attacked by a war party of Dakota. One account suggests that after her father was killed she pretended to be dead long enough to satisfy enemy suspicions. Then she grasped her father's gun and pursued the fleeing Dakota. In the months that followed her successful warrior exploits, she was honored in many Ojibway lodges throughout the surrounding territory. This woman warrior eventually married, and at one point in her life found herself with two husbands. Apparently she assumed that a first husband had been killed in the Civil War and married another man, only to find out later that her first husband was alive. Hanging Cloud Woman ended her very long career as a housekeeper for a local lumber baron and died in 1919.<sup>31</sup>

All too brief and scattered references to other such women among the Ojibway point to the possibility that this position was institutionalized, that there was a patterned, community-recognized way of becoming a woman warrior. Warrior women, for example, exhibited common life histories: youthful vision quests which pointed them in the direction of a career that crossed gender categories; parental and community recognition of their superior athletic skills; and delayed marriage. Taken together, this information suggests that the Ojibway maintained culturally recognized channels that women could use to enter male-dominated domains.

IN EXPLORING women's status in hunting societies beyond fleeting impressions and commonly accepted stereotypes, a new image of Ojibway women begins to emerge. This image speaks of dynamic and resourceful women whose contributions encompassed traditionally defined female roles and reached beyond them into nearly every facet of life. Women were in a very real sense economic providers. They worked alone and in groups to construct the lodges, collect the firewood, make the clothing, and produce a substantial portion of

the food supply. Credit for these contributions has for too long been hidden in the sources because historians and ethnologists presumed women's work to be supplementary and secondary to the primary hunting role of men. Furthermore, continued references to women's ownership and distribution rights, to their products, and to their strong voice in determining how male-acquired resources should be distributed suggest that the products of women's work were appreciated by the Ojibway themselves.

Ojibway oral tradition emphasized the distinctiveness of the sexes, and child-rearing practices stressed sex separation in work roles, dress, and mannerisms. While the ideal of sex separation ordered the work world and social life into mutually dependent spheres, some women were able to make unique contributions in male-dominated areas with seeming ease. Repeated clues in the primary historical sources resolve this apparent contradiction. Taken together, they describe the Ojibway as an egalitarian society, a society that placed a premium value on individuality. Women as well as men could step outside the boundaries of traditional sex role assignments and, as individuals, make group-respected choices.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the over-all status of women in Ojibway history and the quality of the relationship between the sexes is best summarized by the scientist-explorer, Joseph Nicollet, who nearly 150 years ago as a guest in Ojibway lodges of northern Minnesota observed that family life was "not a matter of one sex having power over the other" but a matter of mutual respect.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Schoolcraft, *Indian in His Wigwam*, 130–133; Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 125; Richard E. Morse, "The Chippewas of Lake Superior," in *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 3:349 (Madison, 1857); William W. Bartlett, *History, Traditions and Adventure in The Chippewa Valley*, 65 (Chippewa Falls, Wis., 1929); Benjamin G. Armstrong, *Early Life Among the Indians*, 199–202 (Ashland, Wis., 1892).

<sup>32</sup> Blair, ed., *Indian Tribes*, 1:136; Jonathan Carver, *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, 257 (London, 1778); Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 61–63.

<sup>33</sup> Bray, ed., *Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet*, 188.



THE PHOTOGRAPH on p. 237, top, is by Richardson Photo-Illustration Co.; p. 237, bottom, by Frances Densmore; p. 239, bottom, by J. T. Horton; those on p. 239, top, and 240 are by T. W. Ingersoll. All are in the MHS audio-visual library.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).