

Carl Sweezy on the Arapaho Reservation

We had never made a brick or sawed lumber or had a wooden door to open and shut. Although some of us had visited the forts and the trading posts before we came to the Reservation, and a few of us had seen the white man's towns and cities, hardly any of us had ever been in houses where families lived. We thought windows were put in the walls so that we might look in to see how white people did their work and ate their meals and visited with each other. (. . .)

We knew nothing about how to harness a work horse or turn a furrow in a field or cut and store hay; and today I suppose there are men living in cities who know no more about these things than we did. Our women did not know how to build a fire in a cook-stove or wash clothes in a tub of water. (. . .) My people had everything to learn about the white man's road, but they had a good time learning it. How they laughed when a war pony, not understanding what it was supposed to do when it was hitched to a plough or a wagon, lunged and jumped away and threw them flat on the ground, with the plough or the wagon riding high in the air. (. . .)

We Arapaho had always been a sociable people. In our old way of life it had been necessary for us to live in bands, or villages or tipis, and to carry on all our important undertakings together; so we found it hard, in the early days on the Reservation, to learn to work and plan as individuals. Every occasion that brought us together gave us pleasure. We gathered for it early and wore the best we had and made the most of the chance to visit and feast and celebrate. So grass payments and annuity issues meant big times in our lives.

The grass money was rental for lands on our Reservation that we leased to white men for cattle grazing. Since nobody owned the land individually and there was far more of it than we could cultivate and farm, it was leased in large tracts in the name of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, through the Agent, and the money for the leases was paid to us once a year. Every man, woman, and child received an equal share. Often many of us had spent most of our money in advance, before it was paid to us, but all of us went to the Agency anyhow at the time of the grass payments. Sometimes we had spent our money wisely, for farm implements or household goods; sometimes we hardly knew where it had gone, for one thing or another at the commissary or at the store, where we had been given credit. But we made a good thing of the gathering. Even though the Agents tried to persuade us to come to the pay table wearing no paint and dressed in what they called civilized clothing, and even though many of us had little or no cash to take home with us when the traders had deducted what we owed them, we were all there and in a good mood. There was trading at the stores and feasting in the tipis and visiting everywhere, and everybody went away happy.

By the terms of the treaty at Medicine Lodge, the United States Government was to furnish us what we needed to live on, after we sat down on the Reservation, until we had time to learn to provide for ourselves. It was also to give us schools and

teachers, and farm implements and blacksmiths and Agency farmers, to start us on the corn road. All this was paid for out of the fund credited to us for our claim to lands that we surrendered when we moved to the Reservation. Each winter, under this plan, we received an issue of what was called annuity goods. What we were given varied from year to year, but usually there were blankets, strouding for lodge covers, calico and denim for the women to use in making clothing, coats and trousers and shoes and stockings, axes and knives, and needles and thread and kettles and frying pans. Often the goods, which were supposed to reach us at the beginning of winter for use during the cold months ahead, were delayed a long time in the shipping; often, too, they had been carelessly packed and handled, so that the cloth was stained and mildewed and the knives and pans were rusty. And although the Agent and his men were good at figures, there was always some mistake in the count and not enough of any one thing for everyone. Sometimes there was a new lodge covering for only one family in three, or one pair of shoes for every two men. We laughed at some of these shortages and made the best of them. If a man's share of shoes was only one instead of a pair, that was reason enough for the men to sell their shoes and wear moccasins. And if only part of the men got trousers, that was a good excuse to cut them up and wear them as leggings, as the older men usually wore them anyhow.

Each Agent distributed the goods according to his own system, but usually he portioned out whatever we were to get among the village chiefs, to be divided as they thought best. They were responsible men and knew the needs of each family, and they almost never failed to make a fair distribution as far as the goods went. Often we were disappointed over what Washington sent us, but I never heard of any quarrels between Indians over the issue, even when there was far too little to go around and the need was great.

Sometimes the Agents threatened to withhold the annuity goods, to compel us to send our children to school or to give up our medicine dances or to break sod and plant crops. They even threatened to withhold the goods from families of men who refused to cut their hair and to wear trousers. But there was nothing in the terms of the Medicine Lodge treaty to permit this kind of withholding, and the Agents learned not to try it. It made us sullen and uncooperative, and turned us back toward the old road rather than forward to the new.

Wherever we lived on the Reservation--and as the years went on, some of our villages were as much as sixty-five miles away--everyone that could make the trip was on hand at the Agency for the annuity issue. Many of the people, coming from a distance, brought their tipis and camping equipment with them and settled down at Darlington to visit and enjoy life together till the distribution was over. They walked or rode on ponies with a travois dragging behind or came in wagons, and a few of them rode in carriages. The Agents and the teachers argued against an Indian's buying a carriage when he needed, they said, to buy a stove and beds and chairs and farm equipment, but the Indian who managed to get together enough money to buy a carriage argued that he had been told to try to do as the white people did, and

white people rode in carriages. We couldn't do everything at once; so we did first what pleased us most.

All of us wore our best to the Agency for the annuity issue. The women came dressed in their buckskin jackets and leggings, or in calico dresses with bright shawls or blankets over them; they carried their babies on cradle boards and led along small children wearing beaded buckskin or calico or denim, with small shawls and blankets of their own. (. . .)

Annuity meant a happy, sociable time for everybody. The children played such Indian games as the hoop-and-stick and the mud-ball game, or prisoner's base and drop-the-handkerchief that they had learned from white children; the young men raced their ponies up and down the Agency streets, showing off; the older people, who hadn't seen one another in a long time, sat together for hours in the lodges, visiting and telling the stories of the old days. Hunting stories, war stories, stories of brave marches and hard winters and perfect summers when the buffalo grew fat and the bushes were loaded with wild fruit, were told over by those who remembered them. All around the Agency, for two or three miles up and down the river, the tipis glowed at night from the center fires inside. (. . .)

Food was issued on a different plan. At first when we raised crops and had no knowledge of how to do any kind of work that would give us employment at the Agency, nearly all of our food had to be issued to us. Beef was issued only after we no longer had buffalo meat or when smaller game was not to be had. Every two weeks other items of food that white people considered necessary to live on were distributed to us: bacon and salt pork, flour, sugar, salt, coffee, and lard. Some of these things, especially the bacon and the salt pork, we had to learn to eat, because they were too salty for our taste. Later, when the buffalo were all gone and even small game was less plentiful, but when many of us began to have foodstuffs from our farms and some money to buy part of our supplies, only beef and flour were issued. These rations were supposed to be enough to last each family for two weeks, but it was hard for any Indian to learn to divide what he had on hand and make it last fourteen days. It had always been our custom to feast when food was plenty and to share all we had when there were visitors. (. . .) The Agents thought we were wasteful and blind to everything but the present, but they had never grown up in a village that used and enjoyed whatever food and fuel and pasture was at hand and then moved on to where there was sure to be more.

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