

The Pioneer Photography of Julia E. Tuell

Life on the reservation. By Brian D'Ambrosio

Photos courtesy of the Blaine County Historical Society and Brian D'Ambrosio.

In the declining days of the sovereignty of Native American tribes, a young woman with an Eastman Kodak camera clicked on scenes normally barred to outsiders of the Cheyennes in Montana, the Sac and Fox in Oklahoma, and the Lakota in South Dakota. Born Julia Ethel Toops in Louisville, Ky., on Aug. 16, 1886, she owed her nomadic way of life to her husband's job as a schoolmaster on reservations.

Julia was 16 when she married 43-year-old teacher P.V.

Tuell in Kentucky. The petite teenage bride and serious-looking schoolmaster first went to an island in Vermillion Lake, Minn., on the Chippewa Indian reservation and then headed west to the Sisseton Sioux reservation in eastern South Dakota.

Her earliest extant photos originate from their third reservation, the Northern Cheyenne at Lame Deer, Mont., where they moved in 1906. On this isolated reservation, Tuell



Strong Left Hand and Cheyenne mother and children with horse travois, 1906, near Birney, Mont. The mother is situated in a common position. Strong Left Hand, a Northern Cheyenne woman, lost her first of seven husbands at the battle of the Little Bighorn. She is reported to have admitted scalping and mutilating dead soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry after the battle. Julia Tuell knew her closely.



Sioux Chief John Fast Horse and wife, Bessie, at the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, 1912. BELOW: During the 1918 flu epidemic, Tuell worked as a field nurse on the Rosebud Reservation, where the family was then living.

became a photographer—a splendid and prolific one, in fact. When she arrived at Lame Deer, all Cheyennes older than 30 had lived through the era preceding the Gen. George Armstrong Custer fight (June 25-26, 1876). Many who fought against Gen. George Crook at Rosebud Creek (June 17, 1876) and Custer at the Little Bighorn were only middle-aged.

Come 1906, Tuell had begun recording images of the Plains Indians. Traditional skills were still very much a part of Native American life and the transition to modern agriculture was a struggle to adapt to. Adult Cheyennes still intimately used all the skills required for day-to-day survival on the prairie: making jerky, pitching lodges, sewing skin clothing, whittling and sharpening bows and arrows.

Around this time, Tuell purchased an 8"x10" glass-plate camera, most likely mail ordered directly from the Eastman Kodak

Company. Kodak had introduced large-format roll film two decades earlier. She carried her bulky, weighty camera and tripod on horseback, in a buggy, and later in an old Model T. (Lighter cameras had been introduced in the 1870s, and Eastman had introduced snapshot cameras that used roll film in the 1880s.)

With several small children in tow, Tuell preserved intimate details: Cheyenne women scraping hides and roasting dogs, dogs and horses hitched to travois (a Native American sled), chiefs in full regalia, and children at play. Afterwards she developed the negatives in her improvised darkroom. Another set of photos illustrates a Northern Cheyenne medicine man's home and family in 1906. The holy man's sacred bundle is tied to the pole behind and to the right of a tent. Black-and-white photographs did not satisfy her need for realism, so she decided to hand tint many



of her photographs with watercolors.

Tuell found it difficult to enter into the daily lives of the people she photographed. Trust was eventually extended to her by various tribes, which allowed her to chronicle even sacred religious ceremonies such as the Sun Dance and an animal dance called the Massaum. The key person in Tuell's being granted permission to photograph the sacred Massaum lodge, where the holiest rites were offered, was American Horse, the chief she admired and who, in turn, felt affection for her and her family. American Horse knew no English so she communicated as best as she could without words. She then began learning Cheyenne, eventually becoming able to converse with him.

Indeed, even her simplest images are



Eva White Crow, daughter of Woostah and granddaughter of Dull Knife, in 1907, Lame Deer, Mont. She holds her baby in a beaded cradleboard.

Cradleboards could be tied to the mother's back, carried and propped against lodges when the baby required sunlight.

memorable, especially those depicting the quotidian acts of life among women: gathering herbs and flowers, scraping and staking out hides, and carrying babies strapped into decorated cradleboards. She captured images of women using stone mortars and pestles to crush and mill chokecherries that would be flattened into patties and dried.

By design, Tuell's photos lack mysticism or romanticism. She wanted to honestly depict life as she saw it, capturing details of



The Lakota holy man Black Elk said, "Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle." This 1917 photograph shows painted Sioux at the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota assembling for a ceremony which will be performed in a large circle. Painting and dressing were key elements in many ceremonial activities.

reservation life, from jerking meat to pounding chokecherries to butchering dogs for meat, as well as sacred ceremonies. Her photography is literature, exposing moments in time that deserve safeguarding. Perhaps that may even be described as prose. Each picture, filled with the rich details of everyday life, contains a small story in itself. Indeed, at Lame Deer from 1906 to 1912, she was presented perhaps the last opportunity to pictorially preserve the Northern Cheyenne tribe in a period of transition.

In 1912, the Cheyenne experience of Julia and her family ended because of that common vulnerability of government service, the transfer. PV was assigned to teach among the Sac and Fox Indians in Stroud, Okla. The Tuells and their children stayed there only one year because they disliked the hot, blustery climate. Their next home was on the Rosebud

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Reservation in south-central South Dakota. Julia, then age 26, would live among the Sioux until 1929, the year PV retired at age 70 after 52 years of teaching.

The Tuells' experience with the Sioux—primarily the Brule tribe of the Teton Lakota—involved three separate schools on their expansive reservations. The first was Ringthunder Day School (until 1916), then the day school in Wood, and finally, from 1925 until 1929, the Blackpipe Day School at Norris. The Ringthunder and Blackpipe schools contained living quarters for the Tuells, while the teaching position at Wood furnished them with a lovely home. Julia's photography resumed. She also worked as a field nurse on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation during the 1918 influenza epidemic.



The dog travois and Sioux at the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, 1918.

On that reservation, Tuell continued her photographic journaling of teepees, pipes, and sweat baths. Depending on the wealth of the family and the times, teepee subsistence ranged from spartan to extremely comfortable. The pipe was a sacred ingredient of all holy ceremonies as well as the taking of oaths or the setting up of treaties. Most religious ceremonies were preceded by sweat baths. Before a hunt or military campaign, holy men would occasionally enter the sweat bath with participants and consecrate a particular weapon or article of clothing to help to ensure success.

Tuell continually captured many harsher views of old and poor women holding their grandchildren. Dogs were one domestic animal available to Plains Indians for food. After butchering, usually by strangulation, the whole dog was roasted in fire so the hair could be scraped off. Then meat was cut into pieces for stew.

Tuell's work was unknown until her youngest child, Varble, brought it to the attention of a Bridger High School teacher in the late 1970s. A custodian at the Montana high school, Varble was in his 60s and anxious to tell about the wonderful photographs his mother had taken of some of the people studied in Montana history. Born on the eve of the Civil War, P.V. Tuell died in 1942. Julia lived until Jan. 20, 1960. Their last years were spent in retirement in Southern California.

Varble Tuell died in 2011 at the age of 97. He spent his final years promoting and publicizing his mother's photography. "She was a pioneer woman," he said in an interview shortly before his death, "and I am proud to be her son." ■

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