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Magic Lantern

And

Mission

School

Entertainment

—By Dr. Karen McKellips

During the years 1880 through 1886, there were few places where people would gather for entertainment in the part of Western Oklahoma designated as the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. The land had not yet been opened for white settlement, and the tribes had just recently signed the treaty which located them on this reservation. The whites in the area were soldiers at Ft. Reno, a few cattlemen who leased land from the tribes, employees of the Indian Agency, and missionaries and employees at mission schools. The two earliest mission schools were the Arapaho school at Darlington and the Cheyenne school one mile north of Darlington at Caddo Springs. These schools became centers of entertainment for the area.

One way of catching a glimpse of the pastimes and entertainments enjoyed at and near these schools is provided by reading the pages of an old Darlington newspaper, the CHEYENNE TRANSPORTER. This newspaper began as a result of an 'entertainment.' The principal of the Arapaho schools produced a fund-raising "amateur entertainment" to which he charged admission in hopes of raising enough money to buy a magic lantern.

Magic lanterns, forerunners of motion pictures, projected scenes from glass slides upon a screen. By combining slides and turning them, an illusion of motion could be made. Magic lanterns were quite popular as a form of entertainment while at the same time were seen as educational as the viewers could see depictions of foreign lands, exotic animals, etc., otherwise known to them.

The entertainment not only raised enough money to buy a magic lantern but also enough to buy a printing press. The mission school published on this press a few editions of what they called the CHEYENNE TRANSPORTER before the press was moved to the garret of a nearby sawmill where a printer, W. C. Eaton, became the publisher and editor of what was then a publication similar to other small-town newspapers of the day and was no longer an Indian Agency publication. Eaton edited the paper from 1880 until 1882, and George Maffet from 1882 until 1886. The Oklahoma Historical Society has copies of these volumes, Volumes II and III, August 1880 through August 1886.

By reading this newspaper, one can learn of the pastimes and entertainments in the area. Much of it centers at the mission schools. Soldiers at Ft. Reno and Indian Territory cattlemen often visited the Darlington Agency, and their participation in school and agency activities is often mentioned in the TRANSPORTER.

The newspaper reports in its "Local Items" section much visiting among the people. Even though the two agency schools were only a mile from each other, when the teachers from one paid a social call on the teachers in the other or people traveling through or visiting from Ft. Reno spent time at the school, it was reported by THE TRANSPORTER. One notable visit was that of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and his family. The TRANSPORTER editor expressed pleasure at the visit, remarking that they are Indians who are "inclined to adopt a civilized life."

While discipline at the schools was strict and the Native American children spent long hours at academic studies and in learning to farm and keep house in the white man's way, the school personnel did seem to make an effort to provide for the children to play and enjoy themselves. We read in the TRANSPORTER that the magic lantern was put to use and that on a trip to Atchison, Kansas, Superintendent John Seger purchased a number of games for the students to play. Each evening Superintendent Seger or one of the teachers entertained the children with stories, music, or games.

Frequent socials were held at the schools. When several students were preparing to depart for Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania for more advanced training, the newspaper report indicated, "The early evening was devoted to various games and to listening to speeches from the boys...an announcement of supper was made and each boy, in the most approved manner, escorted a fair maiden of the forest to the table which was bountifully supplied with just such things as are calculated to appease the appetite of the most fastidious."

The Cheyenne school was equipped with an organ which an enterprising teacher, on vacation in the East, had convinced the manufacturer to sell to her for "cost of materials," \$40, rather than the usual \$175 price. An agency choir, which the TRANSPORTER editor praised as "one of the finest...in the West," with music which "...reminds one of the culture of Eastern cities," was organized. Choirs of Cheyenne and Arapaho children were also organized, and some of the children were taught to play the organ.

There were occasional Cheyenne or Arapaho ceremonials and powwows held near the mission; however, the editors of the TRANSPORTER disapproved of them and reported on them briefly and negatively. The obvious prejudice against Native American culture and languages, which is evident in the pages of the newspaper, makes it an inappropriate source for understanding the lives of the Plains Indians at this time.

Hunting was a pastime for the men. The TRANSPORTER reported that the Indian Agent John Miles and a friend killed twenty turkeys on one trip and gave five to the editor of the paper. Rabbit hunting is also mentioned.

While reading for entertainment is not discussed in the TRANSPORTER, it carries an ad

for a book and stationery store in Caldwell, Kansas, and the newspaper itself carries an item offering to send orders for "almost any publication in the United States." The newspaper also carries an ad for a restaurant in Caldwell—quite a distance to go for a meal!

For a brief time, there was a hotel near the agency. The TRANSPORTER reported its closing to be the result of a domestic dispute between the proprietor and his wife in which the wife was accused of infidelity.

Some entertainment was available at Ft. Reno but given the lack of good roads and the methods of transportation of the time, it would appear that it would take quite an effort to attend the dances and socials held there. The Ft Reno Social Club charged fifty cents a couple for its dances.

It appears that most group entertainment took place at the mission schools. One event reported as entertainment by the newspaper was the wedding of Matches, a Cheyenne recently returned from school at Carlisle, and Emma Bull Bear, an employee at the Arapaho school. The TRANSPORTER editor reports that most of the white people of the agency, the Indian employees, and 120 Arapaho school children attended. The bridal couple's attendants were Agent Miles and a teacher at the school, Miss Anna Hamilton. The minister made the occasion an educational event by taking time during the ceremony to explain to the school children the nature of the event taking place.

At the Cheyenne school there were gifts, carols, and a "grand pyrotechnic display."

Many of the entertainments at the schools had the dual purpose of entertainment and the training of the Native Americans in the white man's ways. An article on the front page of the March 25, 1881, TRANSPORTER makes it clear:

"Mr. Seger... has inaugurated a system of literary exercises among the Indian children, consisting of compositions, declamations, singing, etc. They exercise Friday evening in the presence of white visitors and do very well...Each one is heartily cheered as he or she leaves the stand. They receive first, second, and third premiums for excellence, decided by white judges chosen by themselves. They have a singing choir and we heard two of the children lead it on the organ.

Much credit is due the manager and teachers of these poor, benighted children for the efforts made to bring them up to the standard of civilization."

Entertainment at the schools seemed to peak around the Christmas holidays. The editor of the TRANSPORTER becomes effusive in his praise of certain festive events at the schools. He says, "As the holidays approach humanity inclines to the festive, and being seized with the universal complaint...teachers at the Cheyenne Mission gave...in the ladies parlor, an elegant repast, which would have done credit at a banquet in honor of General Grant or Sarah Bernhardt."

Nor were the children at either school left out of the festivities. Presents were provided for all, some purchased by the mission's staff and some sent by philanthropists as far away as New York. At the Cheyenne school there were gifts, carols, and a "grand pyrotechnic display." At the Arapaho school, Superintendent Seger, disguised as Santa Claus, distributed gifts to the children in a "laughable manner" which the TRANSPORTER editor said amused him and the other adults in attendance. A number of "Reno gentlemen" were there, and the room was elaborately decorated with evergreens in "many beautiful designs" with a Christmas tree set in a double arch of greenery.

Over one hundred years have passed, yet the existence of copies of the CHEYENNE TRANSPORTER allows us a glimpse of the pastimes and entertainments prior to the opening of this portion of Oklahoma to white settlement. Through its pages we can enter the world of magic lanterns and mission school entertainments.

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