UNDERSTANDING AMACHE

The Archaeobiography of a Victorian-era Cheyenne Woman

BY BONNIE CLARK
omposed around 1870, the photographic portrait of Amache Ochinee Prowers is a window into her complex world.

Amache’s direct gaze at the camera exudes a confident strength. She seems at home in the Victorian studio setting, and her garb is fitting for a woman of that era, complete with heavy jewelry and a ruffled shirtwaist. Yet the careful observer might note that she lacks the foundation upon which proper women’s dress of that time was constructed: a corset. This, and her distinctly indigenous facial features, let us know that she was no ordinary consumer of Victorian fashions. Amache was a full-blood member of the Cheyenne nation.

Born on the Great Plains of North America in the mid-1840s, Amache was the daughter of Ochinee, or Lone Bear (Nah-ku-uk-ihu-us), a Southern Cheyenne subchief. Once semi-sedentary farmers in territories on the edges of the plains, the Cheyenne became increasingly mobile when they acquired horses in the 1700s. By the time Amache was born, the Cheyenne were premier bison hunters and important players in the global market in buffalo robes. How members of the tribe supported this collective endeavor was strongly shaped by gender. Typically, men hunted the bison while women engaged in the labor-intensive task of turning hides into robes. This involved staking and scraping hides with a series of stone tools, including the flesher: a stone (or, later, sometimes metal) blade set in an elk horn handle. Flesher were such valued implements that they were often passed from mother to daughter. Women also spent much of their time gathering the wild plants of the prairie, both for food and as raw materials important for products like medicines and dyes. The physical tools for that endeavor were digging sticks and baskets, but most critical was an intimate knowledge of the landscape and resources of the prairie—something that was also passed through the generations.

As the daughter of a subchief, Amache would have been well trained in the arts of Cheyenne women. That social position also put her in contact with individuals who sought out her father. One of these was John Prowers, a young Anglo-American man from Missouri who traded on the Santa Fe Trail circuit. When Amache was in her adolescence, Prowers began his courtship of her in earnest. He began the series of gift exchanges needed to make the courtship legitimate, a process that could take up to three years. Amache and John Prowers were married in 1861, after which the two of them moved to the commissary at Bent’s New Fort.

In 1867 John Prowers built on his trading experience by opening a store in Boggsville, Colorado. Like other sites on the Santa Fe Trail, Boggsville represents a crossroads—geographically, culturally, economically. Located where the Santa Fe Trail crosses the Purgatoire River, the settlement was founded by Rumalda Luna and Tom Boggs. The two claimed the land through Rumalda’s uncle, Cornelio Vigil, once the alcalde, or mayor, of Taos, New Mexico, and co-grantee of the Vigil-St. Vrain Mexican land grant. In time the Boggses were joined by a number of Rumalda’s relatives and their families, as well as the Prowers family and some of their kin. For ten years, from 1863 to 1873, the settlement served as a way station for travelers, headquarters for local ranchers, post office, market, polling place, and even the county seat.

Much of Amache’s time at Boggsville was likely devoted to her immediate family. When she and John moved to the settlement they had two young daughters, but the family quickly grew by three more children. Added to her duties as a mother were those of a hostess. Hundreds of travelers made their way to Boggsville during that last decade before the railroad was built beside the Santa Fe Trail. Because John’s store was located in the Prowers house, Amache would often host these sojourners. She also accommodated her own visiting Cheyenne family, her natal band pitching their tipis next to her house for a time before they moved on. Often their travels were between the newly established Southern Cheyenne reservation in Oklahoma and their traditional hunting and fishing...
grounds in the foothills of Colorado.

Amache lived at a time of great change for the Cheyennes and for the country in which they uneasily resided. The choices she made—including the one to marry outside her tribe but to continue relations with her tribespeople—placed her in a delicate position, especially when her father was among the Southern Cheyennes murdered in the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. If individual lives can contribute to our understanding of history, Amache’s is certainly one of import.

But history alone cannot tell her story. Although Amache could fluently speak three languages—Cheyenne, English, and Spanish—she was illiterate. The documents of her life include a scattering of legal papers regarding her husband’s estate, several photographs, and the remembrances of her children and grandchildren. Historians’ accounts and public memory have largely focused on Amache’s assimilation into Euro-American society. A plaque below her portrait in the Bent County Courthouse claims that the Cheyenne woman was respected due to her strenuous efforts to adapt to the white man’s ways. But to truly understand her as a person—unfiltered by racism or nostalgia—we must complement typical historical sources with other kinds of information.

One such source is the material record of her life, something that can be recovered through historical archaeology. Amache’s story is particularly well suited to an approach that combines an examination of one individual’s lived life (biography) with an analysis of the material remains associated with that life (archaeology). The result is *archaeobiography*, a narrative that uses documentary records, material culture, and excavated artifacts to tell the story of a specific person during a specific time.

A series of excavations both inside and surrounding the Prowers house at Boggsville have yielded a material record of one of the most important periods in Amache’s life, when her identity was established as a mother, as the wife of a successful businessman, and as an adult member of her tribe. The results of these excavations stand in contradiction to histories that portray Amache as an assimilated Victorian wife and mother. They do, however, coincide with her children’s memories of the many Cheyenne traditions that she continued to practice. In a 1945 article for *The Colorado Magazine*, Amache’s oldest daughter, Mary Prowers Hudnall, described Cheyenne foods Amache made or gathered—her use of wild plums and chokecherries in preserves, pickling prickly pears, and gathering fresh wild greens like lamb’s quarters. Amache also used wild plants important in Cheyenne ethnomedical practices. To date, no botanical studies have been performed at Boggsville, but the recovery of a broken pestle from the deposits inside the Prowers house implies that Amache engaged in Cheyenne methods of food and herb preparation.

Small glass beads were also recovered throughout the house and yard, suggesting that Amache probably continued to both produce and wear beaded clothing. We know that she had this skill because accounts of her marriage arrangement relate that John was given items that Amache beaded herself. Her children recalled that when her family visited, Amache wore traditional Cheyenne clothing. Some

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**GUARDIAN’S BOND.**

_Know all Men by these Presents, That We._

In an 1887 document from the Bent County Courthouse, the “X” breaking up Amache’s Americanized name of Amy Prowers serves as her “mark,” indicating that she did not sign the document.
of the recovered beads could have dropped from the clothing she wore on those occasions.

The material record also provides evidence of some of Amache’s activities that were completely undocumented. Both flaked stone tools and debris from sharpening those tools were recovered from inside the Prowers house. Because the artifacts were recovered from deposits located below the floorboards but above the bottom of the floor joists, we know that they date to the historic occupation of the site. Traditionally, archaeologists have believed stone tools were made almost exclusively by men. Only within the last decade or so has the discipline taken seriously the proposition that, because women’s tasks so often involved the use of stone tools, they were likely making them as well. In this case it seems quite clear that these stone tools were the result of a woman’s labor. Not only were stone tools a part of Cheyenne women’s hide-working kits, the women also used stone implements for cutting meat and to sharpen their digging sticks. Because Amache spent so much of her time spatially separated from other Cheyenne, if her stone tools needed sharpening or refurbishing, she would have had to do it herself.

Individual artifacts are tangible pieces of the past. Yet, when we are trying to understand cultural continuity and change, and especially the way ethnic identity is expressed and negotiated, the meaning of objects can be ambiguous. In ethnically diverse settlements like Boggsville, we need to do more than just look at artifacts tied to longstanding cultural practices. Indeed, many “traditional” activities can be more than adequately pursued using adopted material culture. For example, Amache often made buffalo candy at Christmas, a treat somewhat like a pemmican jellyroll. She probably ground the dried meat with a mortar and pestle, but she likely rolled it out on her kitchen counter. By moving from the scale of the artifact to the scale of spatial organization, we can often understand key cultural values that might otherwise be hard to identify.

At first blush, Boggsville does not visibly differ from settlements in Missouri, from which John Prowers and Tom Boggs hailed. The buildings at the site exhibit the symmetry of typical Anglo structures of the time, at least as seen from the front. Both the Prowers and Boggs houses feature neoclassical touches common in Greek revival structures of that era. But both are made of adobe—not terribly surprising given that the majority of women who lived at the site were Hispanic. Original plaster recovered through archaeology shows that the Anglo appearance of the buildings was very important to at least some of the settlers. Both houses were “tattooed,” a fairly common nineteenth-century practice in which the plaster covering the adobe was painted with a block design to make a structure look, from a distance, like it was built of cut stone. In addition to the use of adobe, another Hispanic element of the houses was their U-shaped plans, with rooms opening onto a central courtyard.

The orientation of the courtyard at the Boggs house

[Image of artifacts recovered from archaeological excavations at the Prowers house.]

[Image of the Prowers house in an undated photo.]
makes sense according to the formal layout of the settlement, an arrangement that can be seen in a historic illustration of Boggsville. Most visitors approached the site from the river following the formal, tree-lined entry. From that pathway, the illusion of symmetry for the Boggs house holds: Visitors would not have seen the courtyard until they were almost upon the house. The courtyard also makes sense from an environmental standpoint. It faces south and is thus both warmed by the sun and protected from the wind, which often blows from the west. The Prowers courtyard, on the other hand, conforms to neither the site layout nor environmental factors. As one approached the settlement, one would have seen right into the courtyard. Facing east as it does, it is almost always in the shade.

Taking into account only the traditions of Hispanic and Anglo architecture, the orientation of the Prowers house makes no sense. But if one factors in Cheyenne practice, it becomes much more legible. Domestic space reflects belief systems, especially as they play out in the rituals of daily life. One of the rituals that is the most critical to everyday Cheyenne practice is niy-stan-y-vo, the supplications to the cardinal points of the compass performed to acquire the favor of the spirits who reside there. These supplications were part of daily rituals, like smoking a pipe, and important cyclical rituals such as the renewal of the medicine arrows. Like members of many Plains Indian groups, Amache was probably always aware of her orientation to cardinal directions and that awareness shaped how she acted in the world.

The Prowers house, with its east-facing courtyard, actually mirrors a Cheyenne encampment. Typically a Cheyenne camp circle, and the tipis that comprised it, opened to the east or southeast. That configuration allowed the Cheyenne to greet the sun as it rose. The U-shaped Prowers house similarly embraced the rising
sun, enabling Amache to continue this ritual in her daily life. Despite the almost inconceivable nature of such a proposition, it appears that the Prowers house is a blending of Anglo and Cheyenne architecture.

The archaeobiography of Amache Prowers speaks to the promise of that approach for understanding Colorado history. It is one thing to say that the state has always been a place of ethnic diversity; it is another to envision Amache Prowers sitting in her tattooed adobe house sharpening stone tools and greeting both travelers on the Santa Fe Trail and the rising sun in the east. She seems like such a singular character that one might be tempted to dismiss her life as one of a kind, but, in fact, many women like Amache served as cultural mediators in early Colorado. One of her closest friends was Mary Bent Moore, another Cheyenne woman who was married to an Anglo trader and lived on a nearby ranch. Almost all of the households of Amache’s neighbors at Boggsville were multiethnic families, headed by Hispanic women from Taos and their Anglo husbands. In Trails: Toward a New Western History, historian Peggy Pascoe suggests that the more we investigate the history of women in the West, the more we are “beginning to tell a different story of intercultural contact, one in which women in general—and women of color in particular—are at the center.”

Finding women, particularly women of color, at western crossroads doesn’t happen just in Colorado. Archaeologists at the Presidio in San Francisco and Fort Bridger in Wyoming have recovered material remains that speak to the critical roles women of color played in supporting both those settlements. These new interpretations of western history counter the myths that often both write women out of and “whitewash” our early history. The danger in these myths is that they deny us knowledge of so many people who were vital to the creation of the American West.

We allow this at our peril because, just like Amache, we live in a world where learning how to negotiate difference is crucial to our survival.

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For Further Reading
Readers interested in the life of Amache Ochinee Prowers should visit Boggsville, a community-based museum just outside of Las Animas, Colorado. Visitors to the site can see the house where Amache lived and pick up the free brochure, The Women of Boggsville, with information about Amache and the other women who lived at the site. For driving directions and an overview of Boggsville history, see www.santafetrailscenicandhistorichwyway.org/boggsville.html. For current operating hours and information about other historic sites in Bent County, go to www.bentcounty.org/sitesandcelebrations/historic.htm.

A portion of the Colorado History Museum exhibit Tribal Paths focuses on Amache’s life story. The exhibit features recent oral histories from Amache’s Cheyenne relatives. For remembrances from one of her daughters, see “Early History of Bent County” by Mary Prowers Hudnall in The Colorado Magazine 22, issue 6 (1945). Greater detail about the archaeology of Amache and Boggsville can be found in the author’s unpublished master’s thesis, Amache Ochinee Prowers: An Archaeobiography (University of Denver, Department of Anthropology, 1996). Detailed (if dated) information on Boggsville history can be found in Boggsville: Cradle of the Colorado Cattle Industry by Charles C. Hurd (Las Animas, Colo.: Boggsville Committee, 1957). For a concise ethnography of the Cheyenne, see Stan Hoig’s The Cheyenne (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989). The definitive ethnography of the group is George Bird Grinnell’s The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life (New York: Cooper Square, 1962).