

HONORING THE ANCESTORS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS: CHIRICAHUA APACHES

An interview with H. Henrietta Stockel



The ancestral homeland of the Chiricahua Apaches is located in the portion of northern Mexico that ultimately became the southeastern and southwestern regions of Arizona and New Mexico. The Chiricahua Apaches were among several related mobile Apache groups living unrestrained in this area before contact with Europeans. They were hunters and gatherers, foragers who lived off the land. They spoke a Southern Athapaskan language. The Apaches were subjected to Spanish colonialism beginning in the mid-1600s, to Mexican colonialism after the successful Mexican War of Independence from Spain (1810-1821), and to American colonialism beginning in 1848 after the United States won a war with Mexico. In 1913 more than 200 Chiricahua Apaches—men, women, and children—were released from 27 years of imprisonment in locations in Florida, Alabama, and Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Most moved to Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico to live there among Mescalero and Lipan Apaches. Stories tell that about 80 Chiricahuas were given government funds to purchase lands near Fort Sill—properties owned by the families of deceased Comanches. These Apaches eventually formed the Fort Sill Apache tribe. In the mid-1930s, all Apaches living on the Mescalero Apache Reservation voted to make “Mescalero Apache” the legal name of their tribe. A number of Apaches on the reservation retain memory of their ancestral lineages and customs, although as the elders die so does much of the information. The traditional Apache language, now modified to combine Chiricahua and Mescalero dialects, is preserved in some

homes and in language classes in the schools. Many tribal members are Christians and attend St. Joseph Apache Mission (Catholic church) and the Mescalero Reformed Church.

Henrietta Stockel, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: How and why did you become involved in the study of Native American peoples and their religions and cultures?

Stockel: It began when I was a child of ten years attending a Saturday matinee in our local movie theater in Fords, New Jersey. The film featured John Wayne as a cavalry officer determined to kill Apaches because they were in the way of what was generically known in the film as “progress” but was actually American imperialism. The new nation’s thirst for western lands that were inhabited by Apaches and other Native Americans was for economic profit and the Indians were in the way. Initially John Wayne’s character couldn’t subdue Geronimo’s band, which impressed me, and instead of applauding for the army that eventually captured Geronimo and his group in 1886, I loudly cheered for Geronimo and never forgot him. I carried the memory of my government’s actions against Apaches throughout my early adult years, even composing an essay in the seventh grade about the human cost of expansionism; it won an award. As an adult, I explored the American West on several vacations, reluctantly returning to my ongoing higher education at Columbia University in New York. I was determined to move west some day and pursue my wish to learn more about the Chiricahua Apaches, not simply read about them in books written by others.

WRSP: The name of Geronimo (1829-1909) is known in the dominant American culture, but probably few people really know who he was and what he did. What is Geronimo’s significance?

Stockel: Geronimo was a media star of his day because of his warfare exploits but was never a chief. His fighting skills were superior and he combined them with a supernatural ability to avoid pursuers, becoming a hero to many Americans who objected to the government’s relentless war with Indian peoples. He and other notable natives represent the American Indians’ struggle to retain their land and identity in the face of overwhelming odds.

WRSP: How did you become involved in preserving Apache stories about their history and past way of life and their ancestral religion?

Stockel: I decided that the simplest way to become involved with Chiricahua and Mescalero Apaches was to move where they live, the Mescalero Apache Reservation. When I left the university I moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, 200 miles from the reservation. I had learned of an author, Eve Ball, who lived in Ruidoso, New Mexico, quite close to the reservation, and had written a book, *Indeh: An Apache Odyssey*

(with Nora Henn and Lynda A. Sanchez, 1980) by interviewing the descendants of the great historical Apache leaders. I contacted Mrs. Ball and spent years learning from her. When she died, I began my own work, commuting to the reservation on weekends from my home in Santa Fe. Next, when my job with state government and I were transferred to Albuquerque, I was closer to the reservation, making the commute on weekends less lengthy. I took a two year break to write one of my books—*Survival of the Spirit: Chiricahua Apaches in Captivity* (1993)—and then worked at the University of New Mexico as an instructor in Chiricahua Apache History and Culture as well as a Special Projects Bibliographer at UNM's Health Sciences Center. At the HSC I abstracted 3,000 articles on Native American Health History and entered them into an online database. When I became seriously ill with cancer, I retired and moved to southern Arizona expecting to die and be buried in Apache country. After the threat of death had passed, I moved to Tularosa, New Mexico, which is a village that abuts the southern border of the Mescalero Apache Reservation, where I now live.

WRSP: What is the nature of your relationship with Apaches living on the Mescalero Apache Reservation and Apaches living near Fort Sill, Oklahoma?

Stockel: Today, almost 40 years after I moved to New Mexico and 30 years after I began my journey to be among New Mexico's Apache people, I have come full circle from my childhood infatuation with Geronimo and the Apaches. I am privileged to count certain Apaches at Mescalero as family and many others as close friends. For years friends and I traveled to Apache, Oklahoma where the Fort Sill Apache tribe is located, to attend their ceremonies and celebrate their personal events. In turn, they would travel to Mescalero to participate in our rituals. Many of the Fort Sill elders have died and the current generations living in New Mexico and Oklahoma don't express much interest in continuing the close association.

WRSP: What is the most significant change you have witnessed among the Chiricahua Apaches at Mescalero during the last 30 years?

Stockel: The movement toward becoming part of the mainstream dominant society at the expense of Apache identity. It is a troubling situation that rejects historical culture, religious beliefs and personal spirituality, all aspects essential to the tribe's functioning as a unit, in favor of imitating a society that has always marginalized them and considered them unequal. The historical Chiricahua Apaches created and sustained a sense of community that superseded the individual and provided the people with unity and a strong sense of who they were. The ancestors believed this communal identity was given to them by Ussen, the name for their God. This sacred gift was one factor that enabled the group to survive the warfare conducted against them by three countries—Spain, Mexico, and the United States—determined to exterminate them at any cost. When they failed, Apache identity remained intact and continued because of the strength of community and selfless individuals. Today's young adults and even some of their parents, prefer consumerism, materialism, individualism, and similar aspects of the twenty-first-century dominant society rather than the ancestral ways of respect for each individual, reciprocity

among the people, dignity for all, and community before self. Unfortunately, imitating the surrounding society also includes the use of alcohol, drugs, and social dysfunction, easily observed on the reservation.

WRSP: In 1993 you co-wrote *Medicine Women, Curanderas, and Women Doctors* with Bobette Perrone and Victoria Krueger. What is the significance of the Apache medicine women in the ancestral Apache way of life?

Stockel: In historical times medicine women were part of a system of healing that began in the family where one woman usually treated minor scrapes and sprains. If the injury or wound was extreme, she temporarily treated the patient using the equivalent of first-aid before referring the individual to a tribal healer (medicine woman) looked upon as more skilled. If that woman couldn't successfully treat the wound, the patient was referred to a medicine man or medicine woman for further efforts at healing. Medicine women also prepared a maiden for her puberty ceremony, a rite of passage for young women that is still in effect today. The medicine woman entered the maiden's life a year before the actual ceremony, teaching her the cultural customs and their meanings specific to women.

WRSP: Do medicine women continue to be important to Apaches today at the Mescalero Apache Reservation? What is the significance of Apache medicine men?

Stockel: Yes, medicine women are still important but their roles have changed somewhat. Medicine women are still involved in the puberty ceremony but don't do as much healing as did their ancestors. Insofar as the significance of medicine men is concerned, I'm really not in a position to address that question.

WRSP: How do the methods of the Apache medicine women compare with those of Mexican *curanderas*, and also with women medical doctors?

Stockel: The methods used by historical medicine women and *curanderas* were restricted to the available knowledge of the time. They had use of a *materia medica* that reflected the current medical status—a formulary based on herbs in one form or another—and intangible healing methods that were the result of religious beliefs. Current healing methods used by female doctors practicing state-of-the-art medicine far exceed any ethnic measures still in effect among cultural healers.

WRSP: What were the contributions of Apache women to the foraging lifestyle and the traditional Apache religion?

Stockel: Archeological/anthropological estimates are that historical Apache women provided 80 percent

of the food for their group, but that figure cannot be confirmed. Women's contributions to the traditional Apache religion can be noted only through stories, but educated guesses reveal that they were instrumental in creating foundations upon which religious tenets were based. For example, Apache religion was inseparable from Apache culture in that every activity, even every breath, was based on sacred beliefs. Also, every facet of the environment was sacred and was incorporated into the religion. This concept is extremely difficult for non-Indians to grasp, including many academicians who view oral history and oral traditions as being inferior to the written word without realizing that orality is the origin of the written word.

WRSP: You have not addressed Apache warfare in your writings. Is there a reason for that?

Stockel: I have deliberately focused on Chiricahua Apache culture and history, leaving the topic of warfare to other writers. From the moment Americans occupied Apache country in the middle 1800s, the media have emphasized the people's prowess as fighters to the exclusion of other aspects of their rich culture. I find that symptomatic of a patriarchal culture that exploits women and want no part of that.

WRSP: Why have you focused four of your books (*Survival of the Spirit: Chiricahua Apaches in Captivity; On the Bloody Road to Jesus: Christianity and the Chiricahua Apaches; Shame and Endurance: The Untold Story of the Chiricahua Apache Prisoners of War; Salvation through Slavery: Chiricahua Apaches and Priests on the Spanish Colonial Frontier*) on the history of Chiricahua Apaches? What is to be learned from this history, and why is it important to know about it?

Stockel: Actually nine of my twelve published books focus on aspects of Chiricahua Apache history and culture and why not? One major lesson to be learned from Apache history is that avarice exercised by European and American nations triumphed in historical times through power and might. People outside the academy probably consider Apache history anachronistic and of little interest to their daily lives. The Apache people speak of a trend that occurs every ten years or so when public interest in Indians returns, remains for a few years, then fades away to return a decade later.

WRSP: What roles did Christianity play in Spanish and American colonialism, which disrupted the ancestral Apache way of life and religion?

Stockel: Christianity was a weapon used by the Spanish and Americans against the Apaches, first on the Spanish colonial frontier and next when the Chiricahuas were American prisoners of war. Practicing Christianity produced a mutually destructive situation in that the frontier Jesuits and Franciscans compromised their morality through using "any means to an end" to convert Apaches to Roman Catholicism and erase their ancestral religion. In the prisoner of war camps, Protestant missionaries shamefully exploited Apache children to convince parents to surrender their traditional way of worship and join the Dutch Reformed Church.

WRSP: Many Apache children were, as were other Native American children, forced to attend the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. What effect did this have on the children and their parents and the Apache culture and religion? Please indicate the time period in which the older children were at Carlisle.

Stockel: Chiricahua Apache children were forced to attend the Carlisle School from 1886 until approximately 1910. During these years more than 100 Chiricahua children were made to conform to the morés of the dominant society until most memories of the ancestral culture were erased. When they returned to their parents at the prison camp at Mount Vernon, Alabama, and later at the prison camp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the children had lost their Apache identity. Their religion had become that of the Baptists, whose authority at the Carlisle School permitted no other way of worship. At Mount Vernon there was no established Protestant sect, but at Fort Sill the Dutch Reformed Church was the only religion the government permitted in the Apache prison camp. It was easy for the children, when they returned, to switch Protestant sects to accommodate the Reformed Church missionaries. The children found it difficult to become reintegrated into their ancestral culture, particularly since they were now Christians. Through subtle and overt influences the educated youngsters convinced their parents that if they wanted to be part of their lives again, they had to come to religious tent meetings and church. Under threat of losing their children once again, the parents acquiesced and the Dutch Reformed Church's membership rolls increased at Fort Sill. Whether the parents were true converts is a matter of opinion.

WRSP: Has the traditional Apache religion been preserved, and if so how does it manifest?

Stockel: Aspects of the traditional religion that are meaningful to individual Apaches have been preserved. For example, if a certain healing ceremony has shown results through the years, the family who has been helped will continue to conduct the ritual initially while others will go to the Indian Health Service physicians for care. As another example, historical ceremonies conducted to insure a successful hunt for meat are no longer relevant although some reservation Apaches still hunt. If the hunt is unsuccessful, the family purchases meat at the supermarket.

WRSP: A number of scholars have been very interested in the girl's puberty ceremony, which has been preserved on the Mescalero Apache Reservation and on several other Apache reservations. What is the significance of this ceremony for Apaches? What does a girl learn by going through the ceremony? At Mescalero Apache Reservation, do all or just a few of the girls go through the ceremony after they reach puberty, and why?

Stockel: The puberty ceremony is an example of what scholars focus on as a "rite of passage" from youth to adulthood. Apaches tolerate this focus from outsiders, shrugging their shoulders at the

narrowness of interest in their rich culture. In historical times the puberty ceremony signified a girl's eligibility for marriage and motherhood, both necessary for the tribe to flourish and continue into the future. As each girl is a unique individual, it is not possible to ascertain in general what she learns by going through the ceremony, other than the history of the rite, or what a girl's purpose is in participating in the ancient ritual. Some girls undergo the ceremony to please their parents, others to respond to elderly relatives' wishes, and still others take it seriously. Not all girls participate, as the ceremony is quite costly, time consuming, and may have no relevance in their modern lives.

WRSP: Has a puberty ceremony for boys been preserved? If not, how does its loss affect Apache boys and men?

Stockel: The historical rite of passage for boys was based on warfare. When a boy was deemed to be old and mature enough to help the warriors, he was apprenticed to one particular fighter. He became the man's valet, preparing food for his mentor, taking care of his horse, learning the language of warfare. The boy went on four raids or battles and if he survived, the rite of passage was then considered complete and the boy became eligible to fight with the men. This exercise is no longer relevant.

WRSP: In 1997 you published a book, *Geronimo's Kids: A Teacher's Lessons on the Apache Reservation*, in which Robert S. Ove recorded his observations while serving as a schoolteacher for Chiricahua Apaches living in a location named Whitetail on the Mescalero Apache Reservation. When did Ove live at Whitetail? What is the significance of his observations of Chiricahua life?

Stockel: Ove lived at Whitetail in approximately 1948 while teaching school there. Ove was one of the first non-Apaches to gain the confidence of Apaches in their freedom and interact with the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the historical Apaches, providing a first-hand invaluable experience at the end of an era. Shortly thereafter Whitetail Apaches began to incorporate aspects of the local dominant society into their ancestral culture. His recollections are now part of the historical record.

WRSP: In 2011 you published *Drumbeats from Mescalero: Conversations with Apache Elders, Warriors, and Horseholders*. What did you learn from the conversations with Apache elders, warriors, and horseholders? In what sense is an Apache person in the twenty-first century a warrior? Please tell us who a horseholder is and their significance to Apache culture.

Stockel: The book features twenty-first-century Apaches, descendants and spiritual heirs of ancestors who fought in a holy frontier war to follow what their God expected from them. The lessons learned focused on the "might makes right" philosophy in that the Apaches were impotent against the more powerful Spanish, Mexican, and American governments who usurped their land and attempted to destroy their religion. Many descendants today do not have the same fighting spirit that fueled the ancestral Apaches. The twenty-first-century warriors are Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache leaders,

elected and unelected, whose commitment is to helping their people achieve a better life by whatever means possible. Horseholders in historical times were what was known as “apprentices” to warriors. They cared for the men’s horses, served as valets, cooked the fighters’ meals, repaired their boots, and generally looked after the men while on the warpath. Today’s horseholders are the up-and-coming youngsters who may or may not assume future leadership positions. They are not literally apprenticed to adults anymore but may have role models whom they attempt to emulate.

WRSP: A number of historical Chiricahua women were fighters to protect their people against colonialist opponents. In *Drumbeats from Mescalero* are twenty-first-century Chiricahua and Mescalero women also considered warriors and horseholders?

Stockel: Yes, certain Chiricahua and Mescalero women are warriors in their chosen fields, which is why I included them in the section on warriors.

WRSP: What are the problems affecting Apaches living on Mescalero Apache Reservation? Can religion help to redress the problems? Does a similar situation affect the Fort Sill Apaches?

Stockel: The major problem affecting Apaches at Mescalero today is what Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart terms “historical trauma,” the consequences of a cluster of devastating events that happened to Apache ancestors as a result of contact with Europeans and their cultures. Broadly speaking, historical trauma is the culmination of physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual ethnocide that has been transmitted by memories from generation to generation. Diseases, warfare, imprisonment, slavery, colonization, proselytization, famine, starvation, expulsion from homelands, removal of children and their forced assimilation through boarding school education may be included on the list of original causes of historical trauma. If ignored, over time the signs of historic trauma become normalized and incorporated into the cultural expressions and behaviors of successive generations. Today the trauma is continuously acted out through social dysfunction, addictions, violence, family breakdown, and other unhealthy expressions and will continue to impact individuals, families, and the community until it has been addressed physically, emotionally, culturally, and spiritually. While imposing Christianity on the ancestors was one cause of historical trauma, it also appears to be part of the solution in that forgiving in the Christian way those who harmed the people seems to be one answer. Yes, a similar situation affects the Fort Sill Apaches and most all Native American tribal members.

WRSP: What does the future hold for the Mescalero Apache Tribe?

Stockel: The current Chiricahua and Mescalero generation is a house divided in many ways. Many younger people are interested in attending college and coming back with advanced degrees to help the tribe while others remain on the reservation and imitate the surrounding society’s consumerism, materialism, and unhealthy dysfunction. Apache identity, growing ever more fragile, is what holds the tribe together as an entity, is what defines an individual’s place in the tribe, is the source of healthy pride and self-esteem. Participating in society at large, either on or off the reservation, is synonymous

with losing Apache identity by jumping into the American melting pot and emerging with aspects of traditional culture erased in favor of American cultural anonymity. The rich heritage ancestors fought and died to save will be compromised at best and at worst, lost.

Henrietta Stockel, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

H. Henrietta Stockel is the author of numerous books and articles on the Chiricahua and Mescalero Apaches, as well as other aspects of Native American life and history. She lives next to the Mescalero Apache Reservation in southern New Mexico, where Chiricahua, Mescalero, and Lipan Apaches reside. She is a member of St. Joseph Apache Mission, the Catholic congregation on the reservation. Her books include: *Women of the Apache Nation: Voices of Truth* (1991); *Survival of the Spirit: Chiricahua Apaches in Captivity* (1993); *Chiricahua Apache Women and Children: Safekeepers of the Heritage* (2000); *On the Bloody Road to Jesus: Christianity and the Chiricahua Apaches* (2004); *Shame and Endurance: The Untold Story of the Chiricahua Apache Prisoners of War* (2006); *Salvation through Slavery: Chiricahua Apaches and Priests on the Spanish Colonial Frontier* (2008); *Drumbeats from Mescalero: Conversations with Apache Elders, Warriors, and Horseholders* (2011). She is also author of *The Lightning Stick: Arrows, Wounds, and Indian Legends* (1995). She is author with Robert S. Ove of *Geronimo's Kids: A Teacher's Lessons on the Apache Reservation* (1997). She is editor of *LaDonna Harris: A Comanche Life* by LaDonna Harris (2006); and co-author with Bobette Perrone and Victoria Krueger of *Medicine Women, Curanderas, and Women Doctors* (1993). She is currently completing a book on Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache women in religions.

WRSP Interviewer: Dr. Catherine Wessinger

Interview Post Date: 9/20/2014
