



Listening to our Grandmothers' Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949. Amanda J. Cobb. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 162 pp.

CLYDE ELLIS, *Elon University*

Clyde.Ellis@elon.edu

The studies of Indian education that have appeared during the last decade have stressed both the contours of federal policy and the culturally complex encounters that occurred between and among students, their families, their communities, faculty, and administrators. The work of David W. Adams, Brenda Child, Robert Trewnert, Margaret Connell Szasz, Scott Riney, Sally McBeth, and Tsianina Lomawaima, among others, suggests that Indian-education policy was often deeply flawed in design and implementation, and that schools were places of profoundly important change, adaptation, and negotiation. Amanda J. Cobb's book on the Bloomfield Academy (winner of the 1998 North American Indian Prose Award) is a nuanced discussion of experience based on extensive oral histories, which fits nicely into this body of literature.

The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females operated between 1852 and 1949 and closely resembled the dozens of similar academies and small schools that proliferated during the era. Building on the work of Lomawaima and Child especially, Cobb (whose grandmother attended the school and whose experience inspired the book) argues that Bloomfield was characterized by two contradictory agendas. On the one hand, like all schools, Bloomfield intended to remold its students according to the values of the white, middle-class, largely Protestant world that defined both mainstream America and federal Indian policy. This comes as no surprise, and the book's account of school life confirms what earlier studies have revealed about education as a laboratory of cultural transformation. At Bloomfield, this was characterized by what Cobb describes as "betterment," a philosophy that promised a radical transformation of Chickasaw females according to Victorian, gender-based models. Indeed, the 1904 and 1928 graduation ceremonies were full of references to Helen Keller, Tennyson, Strauss, and Sousa, and suggest the thoroughgoing transformation on which policymakers had planned.

At the same time, however, Cobb argues that Bloomfield was characterized by a second agenda that used education for a very different goal. The Chickasaws eagerly supported the creation of mission schools and academies--a tradition that reached back to pre-Removal days in the Southeast--but Cobb believes that they did so for the



tribe. "Betterment" did not mean capitulation, it meant adapting its cultural practices to ensure the survival of the Chickasaw nation. Thus, far from erasing Indian identity, betterment "defined what it meant to be a Chickasaw" (p.64), and reflected a level of agency that challenged the core values of federal policy that defined tribes as subservient and schools as places of cultural conversion.

Central to this argument is the concept of literacy, which Cobb uses as a thread to tie together the three groups that successively controlled the school: missionaries, the Chickasaws, and the federal government. Each administration understood that literacy had multiple levels of application--characterized by Cobb as academic literacy, social literacy, religious literacy, and domestic literacy--and each administration emphasized a different category according to shifting goals, needs, and expectations. But for the Chickasaws, the crucial issue was to use literacy in its various forms to maintain and adapt their identity to survive as Indian people, not to disappear into white America. By using literacy to define their role in American society, and to define their own cultural and social space, Chickasaws saw "a way to control their own transformation . . . a way to create an acceptable place for themselves in a different world" (p.37). For example, even when the school passed into the control of the federal government in the early 20th century, and the curriculum was watered down to emphasize vocational and manual training, Chickasaws continued to interpret literacy as "a cultural tradition, and commencement, the symbol of that tradition, became a new kind of ceremony or ritual" (p.107).

Whether as mission academy, tribal school, or federal boarding school, Cobb argues that Bloomfield was a place where Chickasaw identity survived, and even flourished. Her interviews with more than a dozen former students suggest that they never relinquished their identity, even as they helped to transform it. Yet, the strength of the narrative notwithstanding, the book does not always articulate clearly what it meant to be Chickasaw in the wake of this transformation. Although it is easy to agree with the argument that the tribe exercised a considerable level of agency, and that it did so in order to maintain a crucial core of values and practices that identified its members as Chickasaws, the narrative does not fully explain why this was the case. From a cultural point of view, the narrative stops short of fully explaining how these women became the arbiters of a redefined identity in Chickasaw country. Unlike Jack Schultz's recent work on Seminoles, for example, which examines the Baptist Church as the locus for the evolution of traditional Seminole practice and belief, Cobb does not extend her discussion to the deep cultural complexities of being Chickasaw.



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Still, Cobb has written a moving and informative book that opens a window on the experience of young Indian women. Theirs is a story that has not been told until now, and this book serves an important function by telling it.

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