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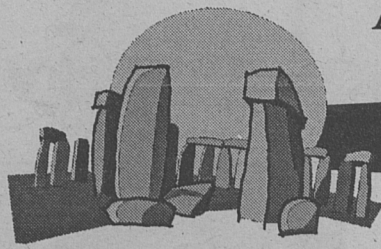
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All the Anthropology that Fits

Stonehenge to Stonewall

By Charlie Emond

Acting Up in Washington, DC

The typical anthropologist has been straight, male and white – the kind of scholar succinctly characterized by Larry Kramer as “some dried-up old heterosexual prune at Harvard” – and therein lies the problem.

From the first Spanish missionaries to modern conservative historians, there has often been unwillingness to observe and record the sexual aspects of tribal cultures. Because the science came of age in Victorian times, issues of sex were discussed in broad terms, if at all, and any mention of homosexuality or gender variance was taboo. It turns out that women anthropologists have a better track record on both issues.

Growing Up in New Guinea

Margaret Mead, everybody's favorite anthropologist, led an interesting life for us to observe. Though married three times, she moved on to a sexual relationship with a co-worker, Ruth Benedict, and in her later life, with several other women as well.

As an anthropologist, she is famous for her use of photography, and for her application of anthropological techniques to modern society. (Incidentally, she is credited with a favorite slogan: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.”) Mead believed in being objective, and unlike many in her profession, she tried to record everything.

According to Walter Williams in *The Spirit and the Flesh*, “... part of the reason for anthropologists' avoidance of this topic [berdache] is that few of them have felt genuinely comfortable in writing about sexual variance.” (Not to mention sexual matters in general!) Williams quotes one stuffy anthropologist as saying proudly, “Such things don't interest me.”

Even Matilda Coxe Stevenson, one of the first women anthropologists to write about the gender-variant Native American berdache, said in 1896, “There is a side to the lives of these men which must remain untold.”

We'wha (1849-1896) was a Zuni berdache (“Ihamana” in their tongue) born in a pueblo in New Mexico. This was one remarkable Native American. Talk about acting! For six months, all of Washington DC accepted him as a woman.

Anthropologist Stevenson arranged the visit for We'wha in 1886. “She” even fooled Matilda, who wrote, “So carefully was his sex concealed that for years this writer believed him to be a woman.”

Though We'wha spoke only a few words of English when she arrived, she soon picked up enough to join in conversation. She became the talk of the town, and appeared at the Smithsonian to demonstrate Zuni weaving.

As a Zuni cultural ambassador, she met President Grover Cleveland and gave him some of her handiwork. Speaker of the House John Carlisle and his wife became her special friends. When she returned to her village, they sent a large sack of seed to her. The tribe was elated that We'wha passed for a woman in the high society of the nation's capital. It turned out that during her entire visit, she had used the women's bathrooms, and this also gave her lots to talk about.

The *Washington Evening Star* described her this way: “Folks who have formed poetic ideals of Indian maidens, after the pattern of Pocahontas or Minnehaha, might be disappointed in Wa-Wah [sic] on first sight. Her features, and especially her mouth, are rather large; her figure and carriage rather masculine.”

Perhaps it is the perspective of time, or our constant exposure to drag queens, but her photo clearly shows a man in Indian drag. That no one caught on makes me wonder what the folks of Washington, DC, were drinking at the time. She looks a little like Jay Leno.

Dressing Up in New Mexico

It was the custom among the Zuni for men who dressed as women to be called “she.” In true berdache tradition,

We'wha mediated between men and women, and carried on cultural traditions.

The tribal berdache was also a special link to the spiritual realm. Stevenson wrote of We'wha, “Owing to her bright mind and excellent memory, she was called upon ... when a long prayer had to be repeated or a grace was to be offered over a feast. In fact, she was the chief personage on many occasions.”

She was the tallest and strongest person in her tribe and “she was beloved by all the children to whom she was ever kind.” We'wha also did her best to help the anthropologists who came to record the ways of her people.

Her death of heart disease was a great tribal tragedy. Stevenson was there when she died, and her last words included goodbyes to her friends in Washington. The account of her death and its effect on the people who loved her is very touching. We'wha was dressed in women's clothes for burial, but wore men's trousers, and was buried on the men's side of the cemetery.

An online biography of Margaret Mead includes the lines, “She insisted that human diversity is a resource not a handicap, that all human beings have the capacity to learn from and to teach each other.” This rings particularly true when considering the life of someone as wonderful as We'wha of the Zuni.

Next time: Are you ready for a gay presi- dent?

For More Information: This column is the 31st in a series that began in prehistory. I often use *Gay American History* by Jonathan Ned Katz as a reference book. This excellent collection of sources includes the death of We'wha.

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queen's College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. Stonehenge to Stonewall is distributed by Above the Fold, LTD, www.abovefold.com.