Crow, the kids and my life

Polly Rhodes

The University of Montana

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THE CROW, THE KIDS
AND MY LIFE

by

Polly Rhodes

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B.A. University of Montana. 1992

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Chair, Randy Bolton

Dean, Graduate School

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The Crow, The Kids and My Life

Committee Chair: Randy Bolton

Abstract

The Crow, The Kids and My Life is an account of my development as a teacher and artist and my search for my personal heritage. I recently finished my third year teaching high school art on the Crow Indian Reservation. As a way to connect to Crow culture, my field project was to create an elk-tooth dress. I continued my research into Crow regalia by making moccasins. However, I did much more than just make a dress and moccasins. In these endeavors, I gained much more than seamstress skills, because I had to reach out to the Crow community for help. Consequently, I developed new friendships.

As I heard of Crow family and traditions I began to wonder about my own family. I asked my parents to narrate a story about my family and my namesake, my grandmother Margaret Rhodes, so I could develop a movie. I wanted to include my students in the movie process so we listened to music and wrote poetry to create the narration for the movie. Unable to understand the newer version of movie software, I recorded their selection of images and music to accompany their movies and planned to join the image and music into movie format. Arriving in Missoula two weeks prior to my presentation, I sought help from a graduate student in helping me complete the movie process.

My final creative project presentation was held in the Masquer Theater at the University of Montana on July 12, 2004, with Crow regalia and student movies.
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Intent of the Project

For the Crow there is no separation between life and art. Crow art extends into and is part of all areas of Crow life.

Crow Fair, held annually in August, is one of the largest encampments in the northwestern United States. It is called the teepee capital of the world. Not only do the Crow display their traditional dwelling, they also wear traditional clothing, including, for the women, the elk-tooth dress. These displays made me realize the significance of their personal adornment. Furthermore, I had heard that the elk-tooth dress probably originated in Crow country due to the number of elk. Each elk provides only two teeth acceptable for decorative purposes. Therefore, the elk-tooth dress was a testimony to the skilled ability of a woman’s male relatives. Her dress displayed wealth and accomplishment.

As I strived to learn about the Crow and their tradition, I began to wonder of my own heritage. I had asked my parents to narrate a story of my grandmother and namesake, Margaret (see Appendix B, p. 22). I wanted to document her life with a movie. I also wanted my students to learn movie-making technology. My students wrote poetry as we listened to pow-wow music (see Appendix A, p. 9). A collection of digital images were available
for them to select for their creation of movies. I envisioned our movies to be marks on and of our own culture.
The Crow, The Kids and My Life

“The Crow Country is exactly the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow Country.”
Chief Arapooish

We are all embedded in nested regions and cultures. By exploring our own heritage, as well as others, we gain a better sense of respect and raised awareness for cultures. This past school year was my third year of teaching; I teach art at the Lodge Grass High School on the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana. As I’ve become more comfortable with the basics of classroom teaching, conducting class projects, and managing a teacher’s responsibilities, I’ve had more time to develop ways to connect to the Crow culture, the school, and the community in which I work. I have very much wanted to become familiar with the subtleties and nuances of the Crow culture. During my first year at Lodge Grass, I was impressed by the function of the Crow beaded elk-tooth dress which many of my female students wore three times a year in tribal celebrations (see Appendix C, p. 27 For a Model). Pink conch-shell earrings and high-top moccasins are worn with these distinctive dresses. Making such traditional Crow regalia, used from the 1850s to the present, offered me an opportunity to learn some
of the design and technique of their robe-making and to expose me to the symbolism of their culture.

During professional training meetings at the beginning of the school year, I began asking my Crow co-workers about their bead-working and dressmaking experiences. I learned that they all had learned by watching family members sewing and beading the dresses. As word spread about my interest and my questions, a number of people whom I barely knew approached me to share their personal accounts of dressmaking and beading. Some told me of their mother’s making a dress, or robe, especially for the new bride of her son. The gift celebrated the uniting of the couple and also represented a family’s acceptance of its new member. A woman is not considered to be a true member of her new family until she has been thus outfitted, they told me.

The openness and frankness of the Crow surprised and impressed me. These people, who were initially reticent and private, were supportive and enthused that one outside their culture was endeavoring to learn one of their rich traditions. Some expressed excitement that I would be able to teach their children dressmaking and beading in my art classes at a time when emphasis on their rich heritage is diminishing. They expressed their wish to
preserve the sophistication of their art, which was the most highly developed of the Plains tribes, and their reputation as the most beautifully dressed people on the upper Missouri River.

As word spread of my project, one of the school’s secretaries, Jackie, approached me and volunteered to help. She explained that her four children perform professionally in pow-wows across the country and that she and her family have made many beaded-elk-tooth dresses. Jackie introduced me to “trade cloth,” a wool broadcloth used for these dresses. Soon thereafter, Collins, who is a Special Ed aide, said that he would help me make moccasins. Later Lorena, a community member, volunteered to teach me peyote stitching; peyote stitch is a circular beading stitch. Both Collins and Lorena later volunteered to help in my classroom. Nora, a homemaker in Dayton, Wyoming, has taught me two stitches, the lazy stitch and the overlay stitch. The overlay stitch is known as the “Crow stitch,” she said, because it was an entirely new application technique for the Plains area. Nora also has helped me with a practice project, a beaded rosette. She taught me the distinctive Crow designs and the fifteen design elements in Crow beadwork. Lastly, Myrna, a high school drug and alcohol counselor, taught me the traditional earring design, using part of the conch shell.
All those who helped me were generous and patient teachers. They shared their knowledge and friendship with me; two even opened their homes to me. Their enthusiasm and kindness inspired me, as did their laughter. I have been touched by their commitment and loyalty.

Through these generous and kind teachers, I have learned much more than beading and dressmaking: I have learned that a beaded dress reminds the Crow of the relationship they have to one another and to their universe. I have learned of the Crow passion to preserve their culture and heritage. I now know some of their traditional art, which proclaims a national identity and at the same time defines their tribal bonds. I have learned that their beadwork is rich in composition and color that reflects the beauty of a world filled with sacred power and life.

This experience of learning to bead and to make an elk-tooth dress, high-top moccasins and conch-shell earrings has changed me. I have gained friendships, loyalty and commitment. I have learned rich Crow traditions and their meanings. I have served as an apprentice in a rich learning environment. I have been compelled to interact with people I’d otherwise never grow to know. The Crow have endowed me with a sense of place and tradition.
Expected and Unexpected Results

We create a body of work during our lifetimes that reflects and expresses our own emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experiences. Through this project, I have become more knowledgeable and visually aware of Crow adornment. I have incorporated the traditional Crow regalia and art into my classroom through doll making. In the future, I will expand on this experience by instructing the female students on making their own elk-tooth dresses, and perhaps war bonnets for the male students. Through teaching native arts, I will continue to make ties to the community and add depth to my understanding of Crow culture.

Not only will I foster tradition and beliefs, but also encourage contemporary artistic expression by providing a forum for Indian voices through movies. This summer I learned to use the movie software purchased by Lodge Grass. The movie software used in the Creative Pulse and the computer program which arrived in Lodge Grass were not the same. Despite being isolated and unable to find any resources to assist in the process, I was still able to guide students toward their unique and authentic individual movie expressions. I led each of them to ask themselves, “who are we as a culture and what do we value as a people?” The result was student poetry
and photos of students and community members (see Appendix A, p. 9).

Because of this positive experience, I plan to use Adobe Premiere Pro program in future classrooms.
Appendix A

Classroom Poetry
Elders are respected
Pow-wows are unique
Respected language
Don’t let go of it

Indians are good
Indians are cool
Indians are smart
That’s why Indians are the best

The creator gave us buffalo
To eat and to get strength
He gave us trees for our tepees poles
He also gave us life to fulfill our purpose
To keep our Crow culture alive

Strong like our name
Beautiful people
Rich in our culture,
From an amazing
Past
We adapt to survive
We are the crow nation
In the morning I wake up
In my tepee every morning
During Crow Fair I wake up
And I go and water my horses
Then my friends come
On their horses and
Then they ask me to ride with them
Then I do

The sun is round and protects
Tepees gave us comfort
The chiefs gave us strength
Led us to victory
Buffalos gave their lives
To us for ever lasting life
Mother earth gave us land
To walk upon
To carry on the culture of the
CROWS
Crows still keeping their composure
Its time for a northern exposure
True to nature
It’s in the essence of our being
Living this native life almost like a dream
Just like water that will always flow in a stream
The culture is still alive
And will continue to thrive
Never to die
Indians with pride
Who have true love for their tribe

Courageous and strong
Respectful to others
Outstanding warriors
Wisdom
Skillful and artistic

Tepee capital of the world
Walking around the arbor
Seeing my people standing tall
To be proud of my culture

Capable
Rough
Ourselves
Warrior
Sacred
Cultural
Respectful
Outright prideful
Warriors

The beat of the drum
Reminds me of a heartbeat of my people;
Ancestors
Who carry our history
We carry the future
The Great Spirit will led us and guide us

The Crow Motto
   Be respectful to everyone
   And everything
   Fight to keep the
   Crow culture alive for future Crow generations
   Respect you elders, respect yourself

Nothing
About
Victory
All just an empty word
Justice will be served
Our people will survive
Independent
Noble
Different and unique
Intelligent
Artistic
Native and proud
Strong and outgoing
The drum beats loud
The dancers move gracefully
The songs sang well
The dancers outfit vibrant
It is time

As I sit . . . I relax
I begin to listen
I hear the Crow Fair Pow-wow
The beating of the drums
The kids playing in the night
I can hear the bells
As the war dancers compete
I can also hear somebody . . .
Somebody knocking on the door!
I must be taking too long
In this damn porter-potty!!!

She was dancing
In a colorful dress
With beautiful flowers
And she came dancing
Toward me
I looked at her real close
She was Sioux
It started out hot and dusty
Then night came along
Drums beating, people dancing
Bells ringing here and there
I look to see
    It was Crow Fair

A place to laugh
A place to cry
A place to feel good
No asking why
A world of my own
A home where I’ve grown
On the pow-wow trail
Is where I’m at
When all else fails
I never turn back

Only once a year in the summer season
Everybody gets together to start the pow-wow
That is the day people will remember the CROWS.
Artistic
Popular
Spiritual
Ambition
Attractive
Loyal
Outstanding beadwork
One and only
Kind
Exceptional

As I watch
Fancy dancers
Dance
I think in my mind
“They look like beautiful butterflies”

As I walk around
The crow fair grounds
I hear Indian music
And see dancers dancing

Dry as the leaves
Faithful as the fountain
He walks and prays upon
A mountain
Fasting for days
Culture
Respectful
Optimistic
Wise

Proud
Religious
Independent
Dependable
Eternal language

Nice to all
Always respectful
True Indians
Indians entertain
Various elders
Entertaining to our events

Intelligent
Natural
Decent
Independent
Ancestors
Noble

Positive
Round dance
Indian
Dance
Excellent
Children
Respectful
Outstanding
Wise

Crow fair is when all
The nation gets together
And celebrate

Intelligent
Natural
Dance
Importance
Ancestors
Native

Indian for life
Never disrespectful
Does not do drugs
Independent
Always have respect
Nice always

Traditional and unique
And respect for the dance
One and only our language
And thanking the creator
But our language and respect for our ancestors
Complete
Rich in culture
Outstanding people
Wise
Strong

Courageous people
Right in everything
Outstanding warriors
Withstand anything
Strong tradition

Come on in
Rhodes
On this day
We will have
Soup and fry bread

Crow fair
Rodeos are fun
Or is men’s traditional and
Women’s dancing better, I don’t know but
Still I think Crow Fair is better
Crows
Complex
Righteous
Observable
Wal-Mart
Super

Confident
Respectful to elders
Outstanding in many ways
Wild
Skilled

Tepees keep us warm as our first mother feeds the flame
Our horses keep us alive by running the buffalo
As we keep out pastures full of buffalo grass for our horses
We feast on all the food that nature gave us and her skin for us to live on
Appendix B

The Wallbank Women
The Wallbank Women
As told by Charles Francis Rhodes to his daughter, Margaret (Polly)

The first Wallbank woman from my family to come to America followed her husband who had come here months before. First he had spent seven years in New Zealand seeking a better life for himself and his young family – better than the life possible in Leeds, England, where they had moved as a married couple.

During the 1870’s my great-grandmother, Martha Whitwham Wallbank, traveled alone by ship from Leeds to New York City, with sole responsibility for their three young children. Because she had little money, she could not pay the required tariff on imported woolen goods. Instead she wrapped the woolens yard goods around her torso until she appeared several times bigger than she actually was.

She traveled by train alone with the children across the country to the Mississippi River where she crossed the river by ferry to Burlington, Iowa. When she, who was 5’2”, saw her 6’1” tall husband, she stamped her foot and said, “John Wallbank, I will go not one mile further!” The family settled not far away in Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

The couple had an additional three children born in Iowa, totaling four daughters and two sons. Their third daughter, Eliza, who was born in England, was my grandmother. She met and married a land and mine surveyor and civil engineer, Charles Francis Palmer, age 39, who had grown up in Mt. Pleasant in a family famous for its lawyers and statesmen. (At one time my grandfather had the distinction of having two uncles in the U.S. Senate at the same time: Gen. John M. Palmer of Illinois, his father’s brother, and Gen. Thomas M. Bowen of Colorado, his mother’s brother, both Civil War Generals.) He was fourteen years older than Eliza. He had spent many years with surveying parties in the West.

He took his young bride back to his job site location in Colorado. In time the couple had four children, a boy and three girls, one deceased at age 3. They lived in the town of Del Norte; he traveled weekly thirty miles to the mining sites near Summitville and Cripple Creek. One day, as he was
snowshoeing the last miles of mountainous terrain, he suffered a massive heart attack and died instantly. He was fifty. The year was 1903.

Despite her family’s protests, the widow, alone with three children, resolved to stay in the West and to raise her young family there. To provide them with an income she moved to Denver and opened her home as a boarding house. Although she was able to manage financially, she caused her family worry and concern about the hardship of running a boarding house and the impropriety of her isolation. Finally her father traveled from Iowa to Colorado and insisted that she move back to the family home in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

Already living at home and financially dependent on their father and mother were an older sister, whose finance’ had died, a sister who never married, and a sister whose husband deserted her, leaving her with three young children. Before bringing his fourth daughter and her three children back to the large family home, my great-grandfather, John Hayhurst Wallbank, died suddenly. The two Wallbank brothers, Arthur and James, younger than their sisters, realized that this house full of women and children were dependent on them for support; they were ages twenty-three and twenty-seven at the time. Without hesitation they stopped their educations and went to work. With entrepreneurial spirits and sharp business talents they successfully operated, over the years, a men’s clothing store, a bank, and a hotel. They lived as bachelors all their lives. They were admired, respected, appreciated, and honored by their community and by their family.

When my grandmother, Eliza Wallbank Palmer’s, three children went off to college – one by one to the University of Illinois – she moved to Champaign and set up housekeeping because all three of her children were enrolled there.

My mother, Margaret Palmer, was the middle of these three children. She graduated from the U. of I. with a major in History, with teaching certification and with a desire to contribute to the world. During one undergraduate summer she moved to Chicago and worked in Hull House. After graduation in 1923 she lived and worked in Waterville, Iowa, where she taught English, Social Studies, and Latin in the newly formed high
school; also, she functioned as the school and town girls’ basketball coach. (A local newspaper story attributes “commercial subjects” to her, but my brother and I remember her teaching the liberal arts disciplines.) I played varsity basketball in high school and some in college, but she contended that she was a much better player than I!

My Uncle Bowen graduated with an engineering degree like his father and lived in Houston, Texas. My Aunt Elizabeth graduated with teaching certification in English and Communication Arts, married Arthur Dickey, a C.P.A., and lived in Ottumwa, Iowa.

My mother, still independent and adventurous, next moved to Momence, IL, where she taught in the high school. Finally she realized she wanted to experience the West as her parents had done; she found a teaching position in Lewistown, MT, at the Fergus High School and moved there. Her closest friend, Dora Dykens, was a fellow teacher; these two were soul mates and life-long friends. Both loved the mountains and teaching children. Dora spent her entire life in Lewistown and never married. Fate, however, had other plans for my mother.

In 1929 my mother and father met and started spending time together. He was managing a grocery store in Lewistown for the Sawyer family. She was teaching and during that time female teachers could not be married. They continued dating, but then in 1931 he lost his job because of the 1929 stock market crash. Desperate for work he rode the rails across the country for two years in search of job teaching high school history. He ended up back in Portland, IN, living in his mother’s home and doing whatever menial work he could find.

One of the President Roosevelt’s Public Works Administration projects was building the Fort Peck dam on the Missouri River in Montana. My father was contacted by two Great Falls investors who were interested in his managing their new grocery store in Nashua, Montana, near the Fort Peck dam site. He joyously agreed to do this, and he and Mother were married on June 11, 1935. Immediately they moved to Nashua where they lived in an old log house that had been built by an early settler. This was one of the better and bigger houses in the town; most of the houses were tarpaper shacks.
The winter of 1935-1936 had low temperatures of 63 degrees below zero. Many of the workers on the dam project suffered frostbite. Because they had no car my mother traveled by train twelve miles to Glasgow, MT, to give birth to me on April 3, 1936. My father visited us both that evening.

My first home, Nashua, was a boomtown of 4000 filled with prostitutes, laborers, card sharks, and Indians from the Fort Peck Reservation; they were all customers in my father’s store. During the 1936 summer a fire started in the local movie theater and burned the entire block, which included the grocery store. There was no fire fighting equipment or trained crew. The fire was moving toward our house when a young boy foolishly called to mother, “Don’t forget your baby!” That was an absurd piece of advice because my mother absolutely adored me, and later my brother also. The fire stopped before it crossed the street to our house.

Because the store and its contents were destroyed, my father acted creatively to supply the townspeople with food. He arranged with the investors to send a railroad car full of perishables and one full of dry foodstuffs. These arrived during the night and by morning he had set up a store at the railroad site and sold from the cars.

Near the completion of the dam (at which time the population of Nashua would return to its original 375) my parents decided to return to Indiana, to Bluffton, where I spent the rest of my childhood. My mother supported my father by working in the grocery store, which he owned. When my brother and I were in high school and college she returned to teaching social studies and history. My wife, your mother, regarded her as one of the best teachers she had ever known!
Appendix C

Elk-tooth Doll