

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Wynne L. Summers. *Women Elders' Life Stories of the Omaha Tribe: Macy, Nebraska, 2004-2005*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Illustrations. xxix + 112 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2536-7.

Reviewed by Jon Reyhner (Northern Arizona University)
Published on H-Education (August, 2011)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



The author, who teaches English at Southern Utah University, intended to research Omaha place-names, and the stories connected with them, for her doctorate at the University of Nebraska. After meeting with tribal council members to obtain permission, she found that this project was “going nowhere,” and she wondered: what if she “found women who wanted to talk about something else, something that pertained uniquely to them” (p. xvii). This change in research direction led to interviews of Eleanor Baxter, “tribal chair and political activist”; Alice Saunsoci, “language bearer and teacher”; and Háwate (Wenona Caramony), “preserver of community and language advocate” (p. vii). Along with some legends, tribal history, and local geography, the three participants tell of the challenges faced by Omahas and, by extension, other American Indians who have managed to survive and retain some of their traditional culture into the twenty-first century.

While having limited historical value, there is interesting material given in this book. The three elders reminisce about everyday life, growing up on the Omaha Nation in large families amid poverty. They go on to discuss leaving the nation to find work. They share their thoughts about the Omaha language; the value of schooling; the changes brought with the passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972, leading to the inclusion of Indian studies in the local public school (the Macy, Nebraska, public school); and the establishment of Nebraska Indian Community College in 1973.

Baxter’s mother went to Genoa Indian School, and despite this boarding school being described as a “military type boot camp[,] she has fond memories of Genoa” (pp. 38-39). Saunsoci’s grandfather sent her to boarding school where she learned to speak better English. While she suffered “shock” in the process, the only negative memories that she recalls were having her hair cut and being doused with flea powder, even though she had no “bugs” (p. 68). Háwate recalls how her mother would “always tell us that you must get your education, go to school. That’s the only way you’re going to make it out into the white man’s world. And she’d always talk Indian [the Omaha language]” (p. 78). Saunsoci tells how “the [Omaha] language is going to survive. We have people in our community right now who are interested in our language. They want to learn. And it’s easier for us, for me, because we teach the Omaha language scientifically. We have our lesson plans and that’s how we do it. We take them step by step because they’re oriented that way because of the schools.... The kids are hungry for it” (pp. 64-65).

I would have liked more historical detail. However, these short reminiscences do provide the reader with a picture of what it was like to grow up in a time of rapid cultural change for American Indians. These three elders tell stories of strength and survival that deserve to be heard by a new generation facing both similar and new challenges.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Jon Reyhner. Review of Summers, Wynne L., *Women Elders' Life Stories of the Omaha Tribe: Macy, Nebraska, 2004-2005*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33112>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.