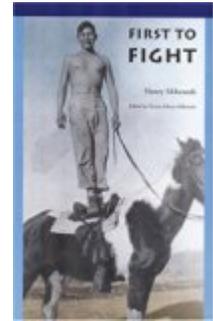


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Henry Mihesuah. *First to Fight*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xviii + 104 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3222-8.

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Published on H-AmIndian (July, 2003)



Memories of a Twentieth-Century Comanche Life

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In 1945 Henry Mihesuah, a Comanche from Duncan, Oklahoma, joined the Marines at the urging of a friend. Not someone to tolerate those who “ran Indians down,” Henry Mihesuah decided to confront his Gunnery Sergeant one morning after he trashed Henry’s personal belongings (p. 32). “What’s the idea of kicking our cots over?” Henry asked Gunny (p. 39). In a contemptuous tone the sergeant asked him if he was a “spic,” and Henry said “No, I’m an Indian.” “Oh, you’re one of them blanket-ass Indians,” the sergeant retorted. Recalling the situation, Henry Mihesuah says, “I didn’t give it a second thought. I just knocked him down [... and] the sergeant bounced off the floor” (p. 39). For this challenge to military authority, Henry Mihesuah received a thirty-day penalty that the Marines surprisingly did not enforce, perhaps because they felt that the sergeant deserved what he got. Although few would consider Henry Mihesuah a hostile person, the story encapsulated the strength and fortitude that marked the entire life of this very interesting Comanche man.

Devon Abbot Mihesuah is Henry Mihesuah’s daughter-in-law, as well as a professor of Applied Indigenous Studies at Northern Arizona University and member of the Choctaw Nation. She brings these personal and professional characteristics to bear in *First to Fight*, a recent addition to the American Indian Lives series published by the University of Nebraska Press. As the editor of the *American Indian Quarterly* and several collections of essays on repatriation, American Indian

Studies, and research ethics, Professor Mihesuah understands the dilemmas posed by the “as told to” genre of biography.[1] Yet, after nearly a decade of listening to Henry Mihesuah’s exploits and recollections she decided to record his stories and textualize them “for his grandchildren and other tribal members” (p. xvi). The resulting collaboration manages to avoid many of the methodological and theoretical errors that other biographies fall prey to. In doing so, Professor Mihesuah provides scholars with an excellent example of how to work with Native elders in a manner that respects their views and contributes to academic and non-academic communities simultaneously.

Mihesuah begins the book by discussing the methodology and motivations behind her decision to work with Henry Mihesuah on a collection of his stories. One goal of the book is to counteract the common narratives of Comanche history created by “scholars who write about Comanches [and] mainly cite each other” (p. xv). Not only does this limited narrative lock them into the era between 1700 and 1890, it fails to recognize the people who adapt and accommodate to life in the twentieth century (p. xv). The resulting racial stereotypes about the noble or savage Indian, coupled with the refusal to allow Native people to define their identities, straight-jackets them in rigid cultural dichotomies. In contrast, this montage of stories offers an antidote to dominant discourse because it reflects how Henry Mihesuah sees himself, namely “as an Indian, and that’s that” (p. xvi). Indeed, this book will disappoint readers expecting larger than life Indian caricatures, marginalized misanthropes,

mixed-blood soul-searching, prophetic drunks, or sagacious mystics. As Mihesuah forthrightly notes, “Henry reveals no tribal secrets, gives no Comanche medicinal recipes, and describes no ceremonies [...] that outsiders have no business knowing” (p. xiii). The modesty of both Professor Mihesuah and Henry Mihesuah is one of the book’s greatest assets.

After Professor Mihesuah’s introduction, we follow Henry Mihesuah through five chapters based on important themes and eras in his past: family; life as a child and teenager; service as a Marine; the relocation program and two decades in California; and retirement on his allotment in Oklahoma. The form and content of the chapters is clear and succinct, with each section introduced by a brief overview of historical issues and events provided by Professor Mihesuah. This unobtrusive context quickly yields to lightly edited transcriptions of Henry Mihesuah’s memories, insights, and thoughts on his life. The chapter entitled “Family” includes a discussion of pre-contact history that places Comanches within a larger network of Indigenous communities from the Rocky Mountains to the Great Plains. We learn that Henry Mihesuah’s ancestors participated in the Battle of Adobe Walls and his grandfather refused to abide by the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek, much like his friend Quanah Parker. These and other early memories shaped Mihesuah’s way of viewing the world and provided him with a strong sense of himself as a Comanche. Ensuing chapters such as “Early Life” reflect the hard realities of rural Oklahoma during the Depression, and his memories are replete with stories about poverty, land loss, Anglo-hostility, and poor health. Henry Mihesuah recounts these tribulations with a matter of fact attitude that coincides with his quiet personal strength. Yet, these years also included fond memories of hunting and fishing, camaraderie with neighboring African Americans, and curious characters such as “Honey Bee Jackson,” a local beekeeper (p. 21).

Chapters Three and Four focus on Mihesuah’s years in the Marine Corps, his marriage to an Anglo woman named Fern, and relocation to California. Many of these events roughly follow a general pattern of Native people during the mid-twentieth century: men joined the military and faced heightened interaction with non-Indians, forged bonds across tribal boundaries, confronted relocation and urban life, and struggled with poverty and racism. But Mihesuah felt that his time in the military had the greatest impact on him. “There were a few other Indians I saw in the military.... The ones I saw stuck together [...] I mean we were all in there together” (p.

40). After the war, the Marines shipped him to northern China where Mihesuah saw poverty, malnutrition, and fear in the eyes of Chinese youth, and he witnessed the political conflict between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. He returned to California in 1947 and confronted racial hostility from whites. “I didn’t take nothing from nobody and they knew it. But what I didn’t like was when we come back to America over there in California. I didn’t like the way they treated Indians. They’re always running down Indians in California. I had trouble with them taivos [whites] in California, but not in the service” (p. 42).

Life in California began with the federal government’s relocation program, one aspect of the larger post-WWII termination agenda. Henry Mihesuah encountered a myriad of problems, ranging from poverty, unemployment, racism, and hostile unions. On the other hand, Fern and their children joined him, and the family found a sense of community and security. They spent two decades living in San Francisco and Oakland, where they met a range of people because of Henry Mihesuah’s racially tolerant worldview. The family socialized with Indians from around the country at the Inter-Tribal Friendship House in Oakland, and Mihesuah hunted with Anglo-, Mexican-, and African-American co-workers. Like other Native families during the 1950s and 1960s, the Mihesuahs struggled to care for their children and maintain their ties, however tenuous, with Indian people in the city and on the reservation.

The final chapter recounts Henry Mihesuah’s return to his homeland in Oklahoma, which was overshadowed by a near fatal car wreck. The accident punctured his lungs and forced an early retirement, but it did not extinguish his love of life or interest in his heritage. Rather, time in Oklahoma enabled him to start Comanche language classes and episodically participate in Comanche politics. But more than anything else, his return cemented in his mind a sense of place and connection to where he was born, and “most people can’t do that. I go to the cemetery and I just go out there and sit. I just feel good. It seems like I’m with my folks out there” (p. 76).

The modesty of Henry Mihesuah masks an exceptional individual whose stories and memories have much to offer academics, lay readers, and of course his grandchildren. *First to Fight* is a thoughtful collection of vignettes that introduces us to one Comanche moving through history without a hint of pretense or arrogance. Henry Mihesuah is a strong-willed man who cares for his people, expresses concern for the land, and thinks

deeply about the future generations of Native children. And Professor Mihesuah deserves credit for her subtle editing that enables Henry Mihesuah to speak for himself. *First to Fight* is a gem not only because of Henry Mihesuah's stories and insights, but because it recasts the pattern of "life stories" and "as told to" biographies that have frustrated Native and non-Native scholars for years. This is one collaborative project that will appeal to a broad range of audiences and hopefully find its way into the classrooms, libraries, and bookshelves of readers across the country.

Note:

[1]. For one discussion of the problems with "as told to" biographies, see Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah, pp. 111-38 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

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Citation: Jeffrey P. Shepherd. Review of Mihesuah, Henry, *First to Fight*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

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