

A TO Z OF WOMEN

A TO Z OF  
AMERICAN  
INDIAN  
WOMEN  
REVISED EDITION



LIZ SONNEBORN

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 Facts On File  
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## **A to Z of American Indian Women, Revised Edition**

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# NOTES ON PHOTOS



Many of the illustrations and photographs used in this book are old, historical images. The quality of the prints is not always up to modern standards, as in some cases the originals are damaged. The content of the illustrations, however, made their inclusion important despite problems in reproduction.



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# TRADITIONAL TRIBAL LOCATIONS





# INTRODUCTION



Lakota Sioux girls at puberty look for guidance from White Buffalo Calf Woman, who gave their people the pipe and made them great buffalo hunters. The Iroquois pause before each meal to give thanks to the Three Sisters, who ensure the tribes' survival with the gifts of corn, beans, and squash. The Navajo revere the powerful Changing Woman, who, by imaging the Navajo's world, helped to bring it into being.

Through the telling and retelling of these ancient stories and many others, Native Americans have long celebrated the varied roles and contributions of women in their societies. As mothers, Indian women have given life. As workers, they have farmed fields, built houses, and performed other labor crucial to their tribes' well-being. As caregivers and teachers, they have instructed young tribespeople in how to live properly and productively. And as storytellers, they have created new worlds beyond the realm of sight and touch.

The oral traditions of Native Americans provide a major source of information about Native American women of the past. But because most Indian languages traditionally did not have a written form, before the mid-19th century, the only written records of Indians and Indian life were those left by early European and American settlers and explorers. All too often, these chroniclers—most of whom were white males—denigrated the status of Indian women. They admired the hard

work that Indian women performed on behalf of their families, but instead of seeing this labor as a source of pride and self-worth, these historians generally concluded that Indian women were virtually the slaves of their husbands. These writers failed to understand that both Indian men and women labored, though at different tasks, and that in most tribes their work was valued equally. These accounts of Indian life were likewise colored by the assumptions about women that the writers had learned from their own cultures. Accustomed to seeing women as subordinate to men, they took for granted that Indians shared their beliefs about the inferiority of women. This misogyny also led many chroniclers to dismiss the subject of Indian women as unworthy of detailed discussion in their writings. If Indian women appeared at all in these records, they are depicted as an anonymous group, with little regard for the ideas, thoughts, or feelings of individual women.

As a consequence, the names of very few Indian women appear in the historical records from the early years of Indian-white contact. Those who do are exceptional figures—usually women whom whites deemed worthy of mention because they could be depicted, often inaccurately, as supporters of the non-Indian conquest of North America. The first Indian woman to be portrayed as a helpmate to whites was Pocahontas. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, a myth grew around the

young daughter of Powhatan, an Indian leader who controlled the region in which the English established the settlement of Jamestown in 1607. The girl was depicted as a beautiful Indian “princess” who proved her love and loyalty to the English by begging Powhatan to spare the life of Jamestown leader Captain John Smith. The Pocahontas myth also held that she saved the Jamestown colonists by offering them food and supplies. Although Pocahontas undoubtedly did show great generosity toward the English settlers in her father’s land, this popular account of Pocahontas’s life strategically omits known facts that reflect poorly on the residents of Jamestown—for instance, that the colonists rewarded her kindness by kidnapping her and that they later paraded her before London’s elite in an effort to raise money for Jamestown. The sanitized version of the Pocahontas story served an important purpose for the white settlers. By implying that “noble” Indians like Pocahontas recognized the superiority of non-Indian culture and consequently wanted Europeans to overrun their lands, it allowed whites to rationalize their illegal and immoral seizure of Indian lands. Stories that arose around other mythic Indian women—including Sacagawea, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Milly Francis—followed aspects of the Pocahontas prototype by presenting these women as primarily sympathetic to the goals and desires of whites. If these women had had the opportunity to tell their stories, their versions would likely be very different from those recorded and retold by non-Indians.

Whites’ romanticizing of selected heroines, however, does not diminish the very real significance many Indian women had in the early years of Indian-white relations. In addition to Pocahontas, figures such as Nancy Ward and Winema made courageous efforts to prevent open warfare between their people and white newcomers to their lands. Women involved in the fur trade, such as Natawista and Thanadelthur, also were instrumental in, at least temporarily, establishing a relatively peaceful coexistence. Some Indian women—including Molly Brant and Mary Musgrove—learned to deal

shrewdly with whites with an eye as much toward personal gain as toward interracial harmony.

Despite the best efforts of Indian women and men to protect themselves and their homes, white settlers had overtaken much of their territory by the mid-19th century. Decimated by non-Indian diseases and overwhelmed by the intruders’ firepower, many Indian populations were forced by settlers and the U.S. government to vacate their ancestral homeland or to remain confined to only a small portion of it. The theft of Indian lands was a devastating blow to Indian societies and economies. Particularly in the case of Plains Indians, whose cultures were structured around buffalo hunting, loss of tribal territory made it impossible for Indian groups to practice many aspects of their traditional ways of life. Equally threatening to Indian traditions was the introduction of white customs, beliefs, and goods. Some elements of white culture were welcomed by Indians, but many more were foisted on them by the U.S. government, which by the late 19th century had adopted a policy of compelling Indian groups to give up their native customs and take on in their place the ways of whites.

One effect that this assimilation campaign initially had on Indian women was a devaluation of the clothing, dishes, pots, storage containers, and other necessary goods they had traditionally crafted for their families. Although these items were made to be used, they were also carefully created and decorated. A woman who could shape a beautiful pot or weave an intricate basket was highly respected by her tribespeople. The status of the craftswoman, however, was eroded as white traders introduced Indians to cotton cloth, metal pans, and other manufactured objects. Over time, these goods replaced the items Indian women had painstakingly made by hand. As fewer women practiced these crafts, the knowledge of how to make a Pueblo pot or a Pomo basket was in danger of being lost.

But starting in the late 19th century many traditional Indian crafts were revived, ironically in part because of the efforts of white business-

men. They recognized that non-Indians were willing to pay high prices for the works of Indian craftswomen. Impoverished by their loss of land, women such as the Hopi potter Nampeyo and the Washoe basket maker Louisa Keyser were eager for the opportunity to earn an income for their families. Both of these masters combined traditional techniques with forms and motifs of their own invention, thereby elevating their chosen craft into an art form and making themselves famous among art collectors worldwide. Although they and other pioneering craftswomen were sometimes exploited by their white patrons, their work helped to bring much-needed funds to their people. Their success also inspired Indian women of following generations—including Tonita Peña, Pablita Velarde, and Angel DeCora—to become artists working in non-Indian media of paint on canvas and pencil on paper.

Aside from art collectors, anthropologists took an interest in the lives of Indian women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As assimilation threatened native customs, these scholars rushed to visit Native American communities to study their cultures and societies. Their interpretations sometimes displayed an ignorance of or lack of sensitivity to their subjects, but their writings provide one of the most comprehensive records of how Indians coped with the pressures brought on by contact with whites.

In addition to studying tribes, some anthropologists took down the life histories of their informants. Most subjects of these anthropological autobiographies were male warriors and leaders from Plains tribes, who had emerged as romantic figures in the popular fiction of white Americans. However, a few anthropologists sought out the stories of women, among them Pretty-Shield of the Crows, Waheenee of the Hidatsas, and Maria Chona of the Tohono O'odhams. Unlike the sometimes bombastic accounts of Plains Indian men, these stories quietly detail the trials and triumphs of everyday life and the network of personal relationships Indian women traditionally had relied upon for their survival. They also reveal

the remarkable resiliency many Native American women displayed as they developed ways of integrating new customs into their lives while fighting to retain their people's ancient values and traditions.

During the assimilation era, other Indian women began to compile their own autobiographies. Many of these authors were graduates of Indian boarding schools established by the federal government. The curricula of these schools were designed to teach Indian children to live like whites. Attending school sometimes hundreds or even thousands of miles from home, many students were traumatized by the verbal and physical abuse of their teachers as they tried to force their charges into the mainstream. But those students who survived the experience usually emerged from the institutions with a command of spoken and written English, which at least gave them the power to record their stories in their own words for future generations. Earlier anthropological life histories were generally compiled with the help of a translator, so the risk of misunderstanding or mistranslation was high. But later autobiographies—both those written by the subject and those told to a trusted friend who then transcribed and edited the material—provide a more trustworthy record of the subjects' lives (or at least of the way in which the subjects wished to present themselves). Beginning with the publication of Sarah Winnemucca's *Life among the Piutes* (1883)—the first book written in English by a Native American woman—written autobiographies became an important new source of information about Indian women. Notable examples of the genre include *Mountain Wolf Woman* (1961), Polingaysi Qoyawayma's *No Turning Back* (1964), Helen Sekaquaptewa's *Me and Mine* (1969), Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973), and Anna Moore Shaw's *A Pima Past* (1974).

Non-Indian education also afforded Indian women the language skills and social tools they needed to take a public role in the growing movement to reform federal Indian policy. By the late 19th century U.S. policies toward Indians had deeply impoverished most tribes, particularly those

confined to reservations in the West. A group of elite white liberals—sometimes called “friends of the Indians”—hoped to improve the lot of Indians by pressing for sweeping changes in the government’s treatment of tribal groups. Despite their noble intentions, these reformers sometimes exploited the very people they proposed to help. Wa Wa Chaw and Zintkala Nuni, for instance, were taken from their Indian families as infants and adopted by white reformers, who later pushed their reluctant children into the limelight to elevate their own status in the reform movement. But other Indian women benefited from their association with non-Indian reformers. The education of Susan La Flesche, the first Indian woman physician, was financed by wealthy reformers. Her older sister, Suzette, who advocated radical policy reforms, was given the opportunity to air her theories by lecturing to high-placed and influential “friends.”

By the early years of the 20th century, a small group of Indian intellectuals emerged from the reform movement with its own agenda. Rather than assimilating into non-Indian society as their schooling had trained them to do, these educated Indians were determined to fight for the rights of Indian people without the aid of non-Indian advocates. Indian women, such as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and Ruth Muskrat Bronson, rose to prominence in this movement, which became known as Pan-Indianism because it encouraged Indians of many different tribes to work together to solve their common problems. Through national multi-tribal associations such as the Society of American Indians and the National Congress of American Indians, these activists sought to help Indians free themselves of control by the federal government so they could better determine their own destinies.

These women’s promotion of self-determination contributed to the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (1934). Among its many provisions, this act of Congress allowed Indian tribes whose traditional governments had been disbanded by the United States to create new tribal governments according to a set of guidelines. Traditional native

systems of governing had generally been fairly egalitarian. Even in tribal groups in which women were not permitted to hold leadership positions, they still wielded a fair amount of political influence behind the scenes. However, in these new tribal governments, which were modeled after American governing bodies, Indian women discovered that they had to fight to be heard. To their alarm, they also found that many of their male constituents had internalized from non-Indian society the belief that women were not capable leaders. Nevertheless, through hard work and persistence, a number of women eventually broke through these sexist barriers and won seats on their tribal councils. During the past several decades, trailblazers such as Wilma Mankiller, Betty Mae Jumper, Ramona Bennett, and Annie Dodge Wauneka have earned high positions within their tribal governments, which they have used to push for improvements in their people’s education, housing, and health care.

Beginning in the early 20th century, Indian women such as Minnie Kellogg and Alice Mae Jemison have also been at the forefront of the battle for more radical reforms. From this tradition blossomed the Indian rights movement, or Red Power movement, of the early 1970s. Many female activists were members of the movement’s central organization, the American Indian Movement (AIM), which initialed the takeover of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, and the occupation of Wounded Knee. Among the leading activists in AIM during this era were Mary Brave Bird, who in *Lakota Woman* (1990) wrote a stirring account of her involvement in the Wounded Knee protest, and Anna Mae Aquash, whose death highlighted the great risks the AIM activists took to promote their cause.

Also beginning in the 1970s, Indian women took center stage in a renaissance of Native American literature. Before this period, several Native women, such as Emily Pauline Johnson and Mourning Dove, had experimented with writing poetry and prose. But following the publication of N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize–winning *House Made of Dawn* (1968), many more were inspired

to take up these non-Indian forms of expression as vehicles for exploring what it means to be an Indian in the late 20th century. By the late 1980s, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Moramon Silko, Linda Hogan, and Joy Harjo had emerged as leaders of this literary movement.

The past several decades have also seen a revitalization of Native American arts. Helen Hardin, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Nora Naranjo-Morse, and Roxanne Swentzell have been recognized as masters of painting and sculpture, while other artists have concentrated on modernizing older Indian art forms. Kenojuk and Pitseolak, for instance, have borrowed design motifs found on traditional Inuit clothing for their drawings and prints. Similarly melding old and new, Ramona Sakiestewa has reproduced forgotten weaving techniques of her Pueblo ancestors to create abstract tapestries. In addition to their contributions to the visual arts, Indian women such as singer Buffy Sainte-Marie, actress Tantoo Cardinal, and filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin have employed their creativity to help their audiences look beyond stereotypes toward a more multifaceted view of Indianness.

The birth of Native American studies programs in universities and colleges has offered contemporary Indian women still another forum through which they can explore and preserve their cultural heritage. Ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth and linguist Ofelia Zepeda have worked to revive the music, dance, and languages of Indian peoples, whereas literary scholar Paula Gunn Allen and anthropologist Beatrice Medicine have concentrated on creating a more detailed and less culturally biased picture of Native American women than white male scholars have provided in the past. To share this ongoing reexamination of Indian history and society, many Indian women, such as Janine Pease and Ruth Roessel, have also pursued distinguished careers as educators. Although these scholars and teachers work from a classroom instead of a hogan, tipi, or earthlodge, they are embracing the traditional duty of Native American women to be cultural preservationists, ensuring their survival as

a people by keeping alive the memories of those who came before them.

Increased access to higher education has had a dramatic effect not only on the lives of American Indian women but also on their tribes. A 2003 study found that 60 percent of all bachelor's degrees granted to Indians were earned by women. Many of these educated women have taken jobs with their tribes, helping to manage funds and administer programs. The phenomenon is especially important among tribes with substantial income from the gambling industry, because they rely on educated professionals to oversee complex business and financial dealings. Work in these areas has often translated into careers in tribal politics. In just the 25-year period between 1981 and 2006, the number of tribes headed by a woman has almost doubled. Many of these women—including Vivian Juan-Saunders of the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona and Cecelia Fire Thunder of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota—are the first female leaders of their people in modern times. Programs for social services, child welfare, and education have grown substantially as more and more Indian women have entered tribal government. Although many live untraditional lives, in a new way, they have taken on the traditional Indian women's role as caretakers for their people.

The myriad roles Indian women have played throughout the past 500 years are reflected in the great diversity of the stories contained in this book. Ranging from Pocahontas (b. circa 1596) to Hopi soldier Lori Piestewa (b. 1979), the subjects are mothers and wives, politicians and diplomats, warriors and peacemakers, scholars and educators, healers and spiritual leaders, writers and artists. Despite this broad spectrum, the one hundred biographies here are far from a comprehensive list of Native American women of note. Chosen to represent a variety of tribes, regions, chronological periods, and fields, the subjects selected are but a cross-section of the many Native American women who have influenced both Indian and non-Indian society. The stories of hundreds of other historically important Indian women can be found in

the works listed in the bibliography of selected sources at the end of the book. For more information on a woman who is profiled, consult the brief list of recommended reading that concludes the biography.

Many of the women included in this book knew or associated with one another. To help the reader trace these relationships, references to a pro-

filed subject that appear in the text of another biography are set in small caps. Following the biographies are lists of subjects arranged by area of activity, year of birth, and tribe as well as a comprehensive index. These tools may also be helpful in drawing from the individual biographies a larger picture of the lives of Indian women, their history, and their future.



**Allen, Elsie**  
(1899–1990) *Pomo basketmaker, educator*

Elsie Allen defied tribal tradition in order to share great works of Pomo Indian basketry with art lovers from around the world. She was born on September 22, 1899, in a hop field near Santa Rosa, California. Elsie was reared by her grandmother in the Pomo village of Cloverdale. Following her father's death and her mother's remarriage, she moved into her mother's household in Hopland village.

Traditionally, the Pomo had been hunters and gatherers who occupied the region just north of San Francisco. As whites moved into their territory, they were compelled to give up much of their land as well as their time-honored means of making a livelihood. Like most other Pomo in the early 20th century, Elsie's parents worked as wage laborers on farms owned by non-Indians. By the time Elsie was 10, she too began working the fields to help her family.

She had a respite from this difficult labor when she was sent to an Indian boarding school in Covelo, California, nearly 80 miles away from her home. But the experience was bitter for Elsie. Homesickness, unsympathetic teachers, and unfamiliarity with the

English language drove the girl back to her village in less than a year. She was much more comfortable attending a local day school, where during her early teen years she became proficient in English.

At 18, Elsie moved to San Francisco to escape farm work. She found jobs as a housekeeper and hospital worker but returned home after marrying a Pomo man named Arthur Allen in 1919. The couple had four children.

While raising a family and working in the fields, Elsie Allen was active in several Pomo women's clubs. These organizations sought to improve the social and economic conditions of Pomo communities. In addition to organizing fund-raisers and helping to establish scholarships for Pomo students, Allen was involved in a lawsuit that succeeded in desegregating non-Indian-owned businesses that would not allow Pomo and whites to sit together.

Allen was also a dedicated defender of Pomo tradition—a role that placed her in a difficult situation when her mother, Annie Burke, fell ill. On her deathbed, Burke begged her daughter not to observe Pomo custom by burying her with the baskets she had made. Like many Pomo women of her generation, as a girl Burke had learned to weave willows



Elsie Allen wears strings of clamshell beads,  
circa 1970.

(Mendocino County Museum, #72-29-5)

and other wild plant materials into beautiful and intricate baskets. Burke wanted Allen to save and preserve the baskets she had made throughout her life. Allen's mother also asked her daughter to show them to non-Indians as proof that the Pomo people were not "dumb," as some local whites maintained.

Although torn, Allen decided to abide by her mother's wishes. Relatives and friends were appalled by her defiance of tradition, but over time, she became only more convinced that she had been right. Allen feared that the art of Pomo basketry would be lost if the tribe did not share their work and methods with others.

Although she had been taught basket making as a youth, Allen did not start crafting her own baskets until she was 62. To the shock of many tribes-

people, she also began teaching the art to Indians and non-Indians at the Mendocino Art Center. To further disseminate information about the Pomo art, Allen also wrote *Pomo Basketmaking* (1972), which through detailed text and pictures describes the tribe's traditional basket making techniques.

As Allen headed into her seventies, both Pomos and non-Indians applauded her efforts to preserve Pomo culture and nicknamed her "the Pomo Sage." From 1979 to 1981, she served as an adviser to a research study on Pomo culture and history conducted by Sonoma State University. She was also asked to contribute her knowledge of plants native to the Pomo homeland when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers made plans to build a dam in the area. Allen's counsel helped organize an effort to replant endangered species that the dam project may otherwise have destroyed.

Elsie Allen died in 1990, but she left behind a lifetime of good works. Her most tangible legacy is the Elsie Allen Collection. On long-term loan to the Mendocino County Museum, the collection includes 131 baskets made by Allen and her friends and relatives. In keeping with Allen's determination to pass ancient knowledge along to future generations, detailed records about the crafting of individual baskets and stories about the basketmakers have been preserved with the works themselves.

### Further Reading/Resources

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- Allen, Elsie. *Pomo Basketmaking: A Supreme Art for the Weaver*. Healdsburg, Calif.: Naturegraph Publishers, 1972.
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Allen, Paula Gunn

(1939– ) *Laguna Pueblo educator, poet,  
novelist*

Considered one of the United States's most important Indian intellectuals, Paula Gunn Allen has

brought attention and respect to the growing field of Native American literature. Her scholarly writings, including the seminal feminist study *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), have also explored the roles of women in Indian societies from a Native perspective.

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1939, Allen was reared in Cubero, a small rural village located between the reservations of the Laguna Pueblo and the Acoma Pueblo. Alluding to her mixed ancestry, she has described herself as a “multicultural event.” Her mother was of Laguna, Sioux, and Scottish descent, and her father’s parents were Lebanese.

Despite the many cultural influences on her upbringing, Allen explained in a 1987 autobiographical essay, “I always knew I was Indian.” She was raised primarily by her mother and maternal grandmother, from whom she learned firsthand of the revered position of women in traditional Laguna society. As Allen has said, “I grew up with the notion that women are strong. I didn’t know that I was supposed to be silly and weak.” She maintains that she was unaware of the second-class status of women among non-Indians until she became involved in the Women’s Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Another great influence on her youth was books. Paula devoured “the Hardy Boys and the Bobbsey Twins and *Anne of Green Gables* and Shakespeare, whatever there was to read.” As a teenager she became more discriminating. Her favorite author was Gertrude Stein, whose work she imitated in her earliest writing. Stein’s experiments with stream-of-consciousness narratives later inspired Allen to use the technique in her novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983).

After attending a local day school, Allen was sent to a Catholic boarding school in Albuquerque, from which she graduated in 1957. She was raised as a Catholic and considers Catholicism to be “terribly important to me.” However, she has also been highly critical of the church, particularly its historic role in the colonization of Indian nations.

Allen began her college career at the University of New Mexico. She aspired to write fiction and essays, but became interested in poetry after she came upon poet Robert Creeley’s *For Love*. After reading the collection, she discovered that Creeley was teaching a poetry-writing course at the university. To meet Creeley, she enrolled in the class and found that she enjoyed writing poems. Allen eventually transferred to the University of Oregon, where she received a bachelor’s degree in English (1966) and a master’s of fine arts in creative writing (1968).

While in Oregon, Allen so missed Laguna that she began to feel depressed and alienated—a malady identified as “land-sickness” in Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968). The first novel by a Native American to win the Pulitzer Prize, *Dawn* was an enormous critical success and inspired many young Indians to write. Allen was struck by the nonlinear structure of the novel, which duplicated Indian storytelling styles, and by the confusions of Abel, its part-Indian, part-white protagonist. In a 1987 interview, she explained the great impact *Dawn* had on her: “Abel [had] the same sickness that I had—or something like it—but Momaday had enough control over that sickness to write a book about it. That said to me, ‘You’re okay.’ . . . [I]f that line hadn’t been thrown in my direction, I wouldn’t be here now.”

After receiving her master’s degree, Allen married. She and her husband had three children before they divorced. Allen then returned to school at the University of New Mexico. She had hoped to study Native American literature, but the dean maintained literature by Indians did not exist. Allen instead majored in American studies and was awarded her doctorate in 1975. She has subsequently held teaching posts at several universities, including San Francisco State University, the University of New Mexico, and the University of California, Berkeley. Before her retirement in 1999, Allen spent 13 years on the faculty of the Department of English at the University of California, Los Angeles.

While Allen was completing her Ph.D., she published her first book of poems, *The Blind Lion*