

Owl Woman: Bridging Two Cultures

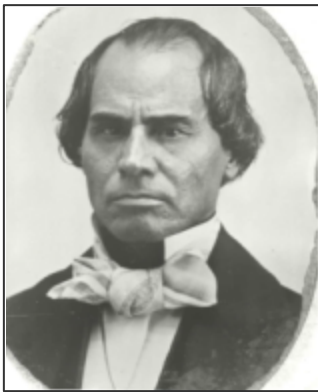
When Owl Woman was born, little did her Cheyenne Indian parents realize how their world was about to change. For many years, the Cheyenne had lived on the plains of what would become Colorado, following the buffalo herds. During Owl Woman's life Europeans, Mexicans, and Americans arrived in growing numbers. They built forts, killed herds of buffalo, and brought cholera and smallpox epidemics into Indian villages.

Daughter of the Arrow Keeper

Mis-stan-sta, Owl Woman's Cheyenne name, was probably born in what is now southeastern Colorado in the early 1800s. Her family was prominent among the Cheyenne. White Thunder, her father, was "keeper of the arrows." There were four medicine arrows—two *man* arrows and two *buffalo* arrows—that were believed to bring success in defending and feeding the people. This honor made White Thunder a high priest and one of the most respected and important men among the Cheyenne. Since she was his daughter, Owl Woman was also highly respected.

Cause for Celebration

Wanting the best for his daughter, White Thunder decided that Owl Woman should marry one of the most powerful men on the plains, William Bent. Bent had built a fur-trading fort on the Arkansas River in 1833, and he was friendly with the Cheyenne people. He even learned to speak their language. From his fort, Bent traded furs and other goods. He also tried to protect the Cheyenne as best he could. White Thunder was wise in his choice. He knew that this marriage would be good for the Cheyenne as well as for his oldest daughter.



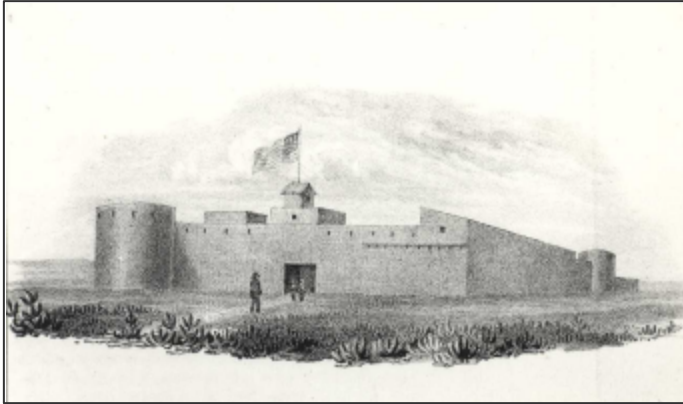
"Little White Man"

William Bent or "Little White Man," as the Cheyenne referred to him, was the fourth of eleven children. At the age of seventeen he headed west to start his life as a mountain man. Once in the area that is now Colorado, he went into business with his brother, Charles, and another fur trader, Ceran St. Vrain. In 1833, they built Bent's Fort. The fort would become the largest and most popular trading center along the Santa Fe Trail. In turn, William was one of the most prominent traders of his time. He was respected among Americans and Indians alike.

Marriage of Cultures

In 1835, Owl Woman married William Bent. The wedding was most likely cause for great celebration. Owl Woman would have been expected to follow the traditional marriage rituals of the tribe. She would have been dressed in beautiful new clothing, her hair would have been washed and re-braided, and her face painted. William, however, would not have followed the Cheyenne customs. After the wedding, their lodge was erected next to her father's, and was furnished by her mother.

The Fort



Bent's Fort was built of adobe bricks made with mud, straw, wool, and water. Cannons protected the fort, while cactus kept the livestock in a certain area. There were sleeping rooms for about two hundred people, along with a billiard room, and a racetrack. The fort was located on the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail. Traders and other travelers often stopped at the fort

for a night or more before continuing on their way. From the mountains came trappers with pelts, and from the plains came Indians with their goods. In exchange for these items, Bent would trade flour, sugar, coffee, calico, tobacco, whiskey, coffee, wine, tea, fur, and guns. Owl Woman helped at the fort, and she was often in charge of Bent's supply trains.

In Two Worlds

Preferring the outdoors, Owl Woman frequently stayed just outside the fort walls in her Cheyenne village. Her four children, Mary, Robert, George, and Julia grew up with Cheyenne, Arapaho, American, and Mexican children around the fort as playmates. They learned about Cheyenne ways from their mother's mother, Tail Woman. The boys learned to hunt and ride horses, while the girls learned to tan hides, make clothing, and do beadwork. When they were older, their father sent them to schools in St. Louis, where he had been raised. By the time they were grown, the Bent children could live in either world, but found trouble in both.

Owl woman died shortly after giving birth to Julia in 1847. She had lived with her husband between the Cheyenne and the American worlds for many years. Instead of being buried, her body was placed on a high platform, exposed to the weather and birds, so that she could quickly return to the earth. This was the Cheyenne way.



Further Reading

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