16. A Late Encounter: The Unusual Friendship between Percy Bigmouth and Martha Gene Neyland Revealed through Letters and Stories during the 1940s
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Seeking relief from the Texas heat, Martha Gene Neyland, like many Texans, spent her summers in Ruidoso. Nestled high in the mountains of Southern New Mexico, Ruidoso is surrounded by the Lincoln National Forest, providing opportunities for hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, and camping in terrain that ranges from the easily accessible to remote and rugged wilderness. It is there that Gene, as she is known, spent many summers during the late 1930s and early 1940s, with her mother and aunt who owned a cabin in the area.

During those summers, Gene’s mother would rent her a horse from Wendell’s Stable for the season and she rode almost every day. At least twice a week, Gene would ride to the top of Mount Baldy, also called Sierra Blanca. This mountain is 12,000 feet high and inside the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation. All riders going to Baldy had to check in and out at the ranger station staffed by the Mescaleros. The forest ranger all those years was Percy Bigmouth. Since she had to sign in and out on each ride, Percy and Gene became well acquainted and this grew into a lasting friendship. Percy wrote her letters in the off season and sent her stories recounting Native American myths.

There is conflicting information about Percy’s birth date. Various documents state that he was born either in 1891 or 1892, with one census record stating that he was born in Otero County, New Mexico, as late as 1897. He would have been 45 or 50 years old when he befriended Gene, who appears to be a young teenager in the photographs. These two unlikely people, with their vastly different backgrounds and age difference, struck a friendship that lasted for many years. The record of the friendship consists of several letters Percy wrote to Gene. They culminate with Percy’s hand-written stories of Lipan legends and history in November 1948, after Gene’s marriage to Jackson Harris, a physician.
Morris Opler, in his book *Myths and Legends of the Lipan Apache Indians*, published in 1940, writes that telling stories is not just about the telling of them, but is also a ceremony not to be taken lightly. He writes, “The narrating of myths was a vital and serious undertaking invading the boundaries of social organization and ceremonial life.” So, why did Percy relate these stories to a non-Indian—and a young girl, for that matter? In one his letters, he writes that he is trying to preserve the stories of his people since the young people of his tribe have no interest in them. It is difficult to determine why Percy selected Gene, especially when some of the stories are sensitive, like the emergence of the Lipan people myth.

Percy Bigmouth, half Lipan, half Mescalero, lived on the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation. This reservation was originally established on May 27, 1873 by Executive Order of President Ulysses S. Grant and was first located near Fort Stanton, New Mexico. It was relocated to Mescalero in 1883, and covers 463,000 acres between the White and Sacramento mountains. The Lipan Apaches from northwest Chihuahua, Mexico were brought to the United States around 1903 and placed on the Mescalero Reservation. In 1913, almost 200 members of the Chiricahua and Warm Springs bands of Apaches who had been held as military prisoners since the capture of Geronimo were moved from Fort Sill, Oklahoma to this reservation. The population at the time the reservation was established was about 400, but by now exceeds 3,300 enrolled members of the tribe. The Lipan and Chiricahua bands became members of the Mescalero Apache when the tribe was organized formally in 1936 under provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act.

Percy’s letters, along with four photographs and stories, were donated to the University of New Mexico Center for Southwest Research by Gene Neyland in 2006 (Percy Bigmouth Collection, MSS 779 BC).

**Photographs**

There are four photographs in the collection, all black and white.

The back of the one is inscribed in pencil with “Year 1940 by Percy BM” in Percy Bigmouth’s handwriting. Inscribed in pen is “Ranger cabin, Gene on right, all wearing Percy’s war bonnets, on left Travis Brown” in someone else’s handwriting, perhaps Gene Neyland’s. Percy took the group photograph and sent it to Gene. An unidentified woman may be Gene’s mother or aunt. There is no mention of Travis Brown in Percy Bigmouth’s letters. The three of them stand next to their horse and “play Indians.” They wear Indian headdresses. The photograph is taken in front of the ranger cabin on a sunny day and has a dude ranch feel to it. Like many tourists visiting New Mexico, a state populated with several Indian tribes, the Neyland family participated in the myth of the West, dressed up as Indians, and rode Indian paint ponies. This was a popular era for western wear when children played “cowboys and Indians.” Percy Bigmouth lent headdresses to tourists for photo opportunities.
Another photograph is inscribed with “Gene with Percy’s war bonnet.” It was taken the same day as the group picture in the summer of 1940.

The back of this photograph is inscribed with “Percy Bigmouth” and is not dated. Percy Bigmouth is wearing a war bonnet with modern pants, shirt, and cardigan. A third photograph is not inscribed. Percy stands in front of a tent (maybe a tepee) whose stakes show. His ornate shirt has rosettes on the shoulders, fringe, and white beadwork on the front.

**Correspondence**

The collection contains four letters written by Percy to Gene. Gene’s letters are probably lost but we know that she wrote to him because he mentions it. These letters—it is not known if Percy wrote more letters and if Gene Neyland only kept these few—span nine years, from 1940 to 1949. Percy wrote with a pencil on lined Big Chief paper. The text is written as a single block, with no paragraphs, even when the letter is lengthy. The narrative takes the form of a spoken conversation. Percy signed his name Bigmouth, as one word. Despite his lack of schooling, Percy is a good writer. He brings up many topics, including his friendship with Gene, his life as a ranger, how he spent the holidays, his family, his hunting adventures, and his schooling.

**Friendship**

He writes about his friendship with Gene, which began when she was a young teenager and continued after she got married. He reminisces about the time they spent together and he tells her how he misses her.

“I didn’t think I miss you, but I sure do.” Letter dated Sept. 9, 1940

He signs his letters affectionately: “Yours truly compadre,” “Yours truly friend,” “Your Indian friend,” and “Yours truly Indian friend.” Because he writes during the off-season, he mentions how quiet things are at the ranger station and he shares his loneliness:

“And I had missing lot of my friends. Used to come up and visit me.” Letter dated November 29, 1949

**Life as a Ranger**

It is evident that Percy enjoys the natural beauty of the land. He also enjoys hunting. This part of New Mexico has elk, mule deer, antelope, and sheep. He speaks of Indian boys having a grand time hunting for antelope, deer, and turkey. In a letter dated October 4, 1940, he describes the darting antelopes:

Right now they are out hunting antelope, on the Eastern part of the Indian Reservation. They have a grand time out there, they told me, the antelope running that way, some of them this way, just can’t tell which way they going to shoot, though just for six days for the antelope season.
Schooling

He also discusses his education, gives advice to Gene, and tells her how he regrets not having enough schooling.

“Well Gene do your level best, while you are young, and study your hard good lesson, throw it on your strong shoulder, and reach for the top, push your class aside and be on ahead of them.” Letter dated April 24, 1947

Percy is aware that he is writing a young girl who is still in school, and he encourages her to do well. He is able to adapt the level of his discourse to that of a school child. Maybe because he had no children of his own, Percy acted in a fatherly way. Even though his schooling was short, Percy’s penmanship is beautiful. Gene Neyland says he learned it in Indian School—Percy says he went to school in Mescalero. And of course, Percy brings up a time-honored topic—the weather—in his letters.

“The days are getting cool, few people are around.” Letter dated Sept. 9, 1940

“No rain, no thunder to scare, everything peaceful.” Letter dated October 4, 1940

Lipan Mythology

Percy’s stories, like his letters, are written in pencil on lined paper on Big Chief tablets. In his letter dated April 24, 1947, he mentions sending his stories to Gene.

“Your delightful letter had reach me, just two month ago, and happy to learn that you enjoyed my Indian story. Some of these fine days I’ll try to add some more, if you say so. I’ll be very happy to do that for you, since I know you for quiet [sic] a while.” Letter dated April 24, 1947

Percy wrote these stories on three tablets over 2 years, from 1947 to 1949. The tablets are labeled: no. 1: Coyote Story; no. 2: Coyote Story; and, no. 3: Comanche and Lipan. The stories are quite lengthy, and range from 34 to 38 pages. Most Native American tribes do not have a written language; they passed on their histories orally from one generation to the next. Some non-Indians do not find the oral tradition credible. However, the oral tradition is as accurate as the written American history. Eve Ball, who is known for her recording of Mescalero Apache oral history, noted that those who follow an oral tradition often had better memories than others who have a written tradition. She also notes that Apache people were trained to memorize because lives often depended on accurately relating messages. Thrapp, in the preface to Ball’s book, Indeh, also confirms that “it was through trained memories that the culture history of the People most frequently was passed from generation
Stories, myths, and legends are more than just stories; they are the history of a people and the truth as they know it.

Like the Jicarilla Apaches, the Lipan have a myth of emergence. In the beginning, the people—four-legged, two-legged, winged, rocks, and trees—lived in the underworld. A council was formed to determine where the people should move. Finally, they moved to the upper world, and “real humans” came after the animals, trees and plants. Lipan mythology includes a hero, called Killer-of-Enemies, who slays the enemies of the race and fights monsters, particularly the monster known as Big Owl.

Lipan mythology also includes the Coyote cycle. For practical instruction, Lipan stories teach the young and reinforce how a “good person” should behave. The stories give examples of the good as well as the bad. Examples of the bad are often about the tricks that Coyote plays on others and how the tables ultimately turn on him. These stories also explain why people act the way they do today. In Percy’s own words in the introductory letter to the Coyote 2 tablet:

It’s a night story you see, we don’t have no written story like the white peoples have…The story will be more about coyote, when he visiting among his friends the animal and the owl…The coyote talk to the trees, even to the rock, and the water. But all the time he play a mean tricks on his friends. Though in return he always get the worse back on him. And today there are a lot of people that way, some tell big lie, and steal other wife, all these happen when coyote speaking like a human, as the old Indian used to tell their grand children. They too learn it from old grand parent.

Percy Bigmouth’s Stories

Percy, aptly named Bigmouth, liked to tell stories. These range from “The Emergence” of the Lipan to stories about warfare between the Lipan and Comanche. According to several Opler informants, stories have a distinct order: “First comes the story of the emergence and Killer-of-Enemies, then the coyote stories, and then the stories of the people, of what been done lately.” Percy follows this order in relating his stories to Gene.

Often one story will run into the next story and it can be difficult to determine where one ends and another begins, but Percy does give an indication that he is onto a new story with phrases like: “Among us Lipans our story goes like this!”; “Well here, I’m going to write another story”; “It’s the end of that story”; or, “Well let’s have some fun with our friend the Coyote.” His stories are also interspersed with historical information about his family, the different Apache tribes, or explanations of certain terms or events. Although Percy’s stories are handwritten, reading his stories is like hearing Percy telling his story in person; he writes like he speaks. His skills as a storyteller are excellent because he keeps the reader involved in the story. One can almost hear him laugh as he explains the irony of Coyote’s misfortunes. Percy’s
penmanship is good, while his grammar will be found lacking by experienced writers. However, this adds a sense of originality to the story. For example, he spells the word “insects” as “inspects” and a reader cannot mistake that he is referring bugs. Percy’s first language was Lipan, even though his stories are written in English. One clearly gets the sense that he is spelling English words phonetically in a voice that has an Apache accent. The reader can almost hear how he talked.

It is important to note that not everyone, at least in Lipan culture, could be a storyteller: “The myths acted as a reservoir of information indispensable to the expert or the leader.” Before a person is considered a leader, he must know the stories about the emergence, coyote stories, and the history about the people. If a person does not have this knowledge, then he cannot lead. Although Percy did not have a leadership role within the tribe (i.e., he was not on the tribal council), he was still considered a leader because he possessed all the knowledge that was required of a leader or chief. Both people within his own tribe as well as the likes of Eve Ball and Morris Opler held him in high regard.

“Among us Lipans our story goes like this!”—Big Chief Tablet 1, Coyote no. 1

The first grouping starts with The Emergence story of the Lipan. Animals and plants are the main characters—“The People”—and they all speak the same language. Percy then tells about the birth of Killer-of-Enemies, who is the Lipan cultural hero, and his mother, Changing Woman. This grouping, labeled by Percy as “Coyote Story No. 1,” includes the following stories: “The Emergence”; “The Birth of Killer-of-Enemies”; “Killer-of-Enemies Hunts with Raven Boy and Slays a Giant”; “Raven and the Origin of Death”; “Coyote Pursues the Insects Called Fat Skulls”; “Rabbit Plays Sick and Escapes from Coyote”; “Coyote Bites Rock Rabbit and Allows Real Rabbit to Escape”; “Wildcat Fools Coyote”; “The Turtles Go on a Raid”; and, “Coyote Dances with the Prairie Dogs including Wildcat Steals Coyote’s Prairie-dog and Coyote Dives in the Water for Prairie-dog.” These stories are comparable to the stories in Opler’s text with the exception of “Killer-of-Enemies Hunts with Raven Boy and Slays a Giant.”

“Well here goes the story about the coyote visiting the camp”—Big Chief Tablet 2, Coyote no. 2

The second grouping consists of six stories and is the only grouping with an introductory letter. In it, Percy writes about the content and purpose of the stories: Coyote visiting his animal friends, playing tricks on them, and also helping them at times. These are all stories about Coyote’s exploits among the people: “Coyote Gets the Fat Away from Bear”; “Coyote Steals the Hawk Chiefs Wife and Is Made to Swallow Hot Rocks”; “The Shooting Contest for the Two Girls”; “Coyote is Stung by the Red Ants”; “Coyote Visits the Arrow
People and Hunts Buffaloes”; and “The Man Who Married a Dove.” These stories explain why people act the way they do in certain situations and why animals have certain features. For example, the story about Coyote visiting the Prairie dogs includes an encounter with Bobcat where they each change the other’s appearance. This explains why a bobcat has pointy ears and a coyote has a long snout.

Among Native American people, organ meat and fat is highly valued because it is considered delectable and nutritious. Coyote meets the Bear People who are forced by their Chief to relinquish all the fat from animals they kill. Coyote changes this and benefits all the people, and this is one story where he does not “get the worse back on him.” In another similar story, Coyote gets back the tongue for the people, but he is punished for bringing about the death of a Chief and ill-treating his son and wife. Coyote is forced to swallow hot rocks and dies as a result. His accomplice in this story is the Bat, whose punishment is that he and his descendants must forever hang by their feet. Death practices are also explained: when the Chief dies, the wife and son are not allowed to reflect or look back on the Chief.

One theme common in Native American stories is prejudice, or the ill-treatment of people based on their looks. “The Shooting Contest for the Girls” is about a poor young man who is ill-treated by others. This man, named “Urinate on his Head,” also has a big stomach and is considered slow. He comes into his own one day with the help of a relative, the Skunk, and wins the hand of a girl by shooting a bat out of a tree. He also proves that he has a strong arm and is an accurate shot with a bow and arrow. As the people prepare him for the wedding, they discover in his stomach all sorts of beautiful clothing. As a result, he is deemed wealthy, strong and a potential leader despite the ill-treatment he withstood. This story is analogous to European fairy tales, like Cinderella, where the one who starts out poor and ill-treated becomes rich and respected.

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Lipan Apache and Comanche Fighting Story of Old Days”–Big Chief Tablet 3, Comanche and Lipan

This last collection of stories is titled on the front of the Big Chief tablet as “No. 3: Comanche and Lipan!” Percy begins with an introduction of what he knows about the Comanche people. In this grouping are three stories about intertribal warfare between the Lipan Apaches and Comanche: “Comanche Captives are Returned to Avoid a Fight,” “The Apache Defeat a Comanche Raiding Party,” and “A Battle Between the Lipan and the Comanche.” These stories reflect the difficult times and decisions that the leaders had to make. They also illustrate how people abducted during raids or battles were treated. According to Lipan Apache tradition, abducted people were taken care of like other family members and not treated harshly or enslaved. Interesting tidbits of information are also given. For example, the different tribes communicated
by using American Indian Sign Language and some Lipan Apache could also speak the Comanche language.

The reader gets insight into the battles, the reasons for fighting, and how the battles ended. Lipan Apaches fought other tribes only to protect their families and herds of horses. They also took into consideration family ties. During one battle, the leader of the Lipan Apache warriors said that if he had relatives among the Comanche, he would declare a truce. Intermarriage among the Lipan Apaches and Comanche was somewhat common because the leader did find a relative among the Comanche, thus ending the battle. Personal vendettas were not a reason to go to war with other tribes. In one of the stories, one Comanche man did not want to end a battle because the Lipan Apaches had killed several of his relatives. The Comanche leader tells this man that if he pursued war against the Lipan Apache, tribe he would not receive any support from others because a treaty had been made. A treaty usually involved digging a hole and each leader spitting into the hole and then covering it with dirt. All bad feelings or reasons for wanting to go to war were buried and were not to be resurrected.

The role of women is also described. They were not passive figures; instead, they spurred men on to fight and served as messengers during battle. One Comanche woman who was about to be captured by the Lipan Apaches deliberately got down from her horse, removed all belongings, and shooed her horse away. This act was meant to roust the men into action. In another story, a Lipan Apache woman, stolen by a Comanche and raised among them, goes to the Lipan Apache men who are under siege to deliver a message from the Comanche leader. The woman in this story is completely calm and tells the Lipan Apaches that because she is with them they will not be harmed.

Conclusion

Percy Bigmouth played a significant role in preserving history. In the mid-1930s, he was an informant for Morris Opler; in the 1940s, he began his correspondence with Gene; and, in the mid-1950s, he was interviewed by Eve Ball and C. L. Sonnischsen. Both academics and Gene held him in high regard. Otherwise, why would she have saved the letters and the stories? Percy ventured outside traditional cultural boundaries by offering stories to a non-Indian girl. One can presume that Percy looked at Gene as an adopted child or grandchild in his tribe. This relatively small collection of four letters and three groups of stories is a rich memoir, not only of two people’s unusual relationship, but also of a broader aspect of Lipan history that was woven into American life. It is a history that is not easily found in conventional history books and is a vivid first-person account by a Lipan Apache.
NOTES


2. In the 1940s and 1950s, Eve Ball (1890-1984) took down verbatim accounts of Apache elders who had survived the army’s campaigns against them in the last century. These oral histories offer new versions—from Warm Springs, Chiricahua, Mescalero, and Lipan Apache—of events previously known only through descriptions left by non-Indians. A high school and college teacher, Ball moved to Ruidoso, New Mexico in 1942. After winning their confidence, Ball would ultimately interview sixty-seven Apache people.


4. Ibid., p. xiv.


6. Ibid.