

An Immersive History of Mixed-Descent Native Families

In “Born of Lakes and Plains,” Anne F. Hyde draws attention to the roles that intermarriage played in the development of the American West.

By Jennifer Szalai

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BORN OF LAKES AND PLAINS

Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West

By Anne F. Hyde

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Any history of Indigenous peoples in North America must reckon with the reality of exploitation, ethnic cleansing and genocide; but to reduce their experiences to unending violence is to adopt, however unwittingly, the perspective of European settlers.

“From this vantage point, we see nothing but a conquered land littered with Indian bones,” Anne F. Hyde writes in “Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West.” Hyde, a historian at the University of Oklahoma and the author of “Empires, Nations, and Families” (2011), a Pulitzer Prize finalist, doesn’t gloss over suffering. But in her immersive and humane new book she draws attention to the relationships between white and Indigenous people that made “strangers into kin,” long before such unions were decried and, in some states, outlawed.

Even before any Europeans showed up, sex and marriage between peoples of different Native groups had served as a tool of diplomacy, trade and survival. Intermarriage with Europeans was an extension of this practice, Hyde says, becoming part of a system that was initially seen as mutually beneficial. “A history of North America with mixed-descent families at its core creates a different view of the past,” she writes, “one with resourceful people making families through centuries of contact and war.”

“Born of Lakes and Plains” begins in earnest in the 1600s and revolves mainly around five mixed-descent families, whose stories stretch from the Great Lakes down through the Midwest to the Southern Plains. The history she recounts is both sweeping and intimate, allowing her to trace larger developments while also showing how families responded differently to changing circumstances.

Anne F. Hyde, the author of “Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West.”
Ashley Porton

From the beginning, intermarriage between white and Native peoples was connected to the fur trade. For European settlers, there were obvious advantages to such unions, including access to the protection and knowledge of Ojibwes and Crees who for generations had weathered the harsh winters around the Great Lakes and Hudson's Bay. Native peoples, Hyde says, had their own stakes in this trade; they knew that European strangers presented both opportunity (information, goods, new allegiances) and peril (war, disease, theft). Making such traders into family could lessen the dangers, "giving them a stake in the clan."

For the French, these arrangements were not only accepted but even encouraged by an official edict that governed *mariage à la façon du pays*, or "the custom of the country." European men became known as *hivernants* — winterers who spent the cold months in Native forts and villages. Sometimes, when an *hivernant* married a Native woman, he was already married to a white woman. Or an *hivernant* might abandon his Native family once he became more established in the fur trade, calculating that entry into the Canadian elite required a white wife. Some *hivernants* continued to provide for their Native families, and some didn't. Abandonment was so common that there was an actual phrase for the process — "to turn off," as in, "When Alexander McKay retired, he 'turned off' Marguerite."

Marguerite, who was born in 1775 to a Cree mother and a Swiss father, would eventually remarry another man involved in the fur trade. Hyde follows the stories of Marguerite's family and others through the ensuing decades of American expansion, Andrew Jackson's policy of Indian Removal and the Civil War. Trading fur with Europeans turned out to be profoundly destabilizing to long-established relationships between Native nations; an expanded market brought guns and disease.

The proliferating narratives can make it hard to keep track of all the threads — a number of Georges and Johns and Williams within and across families means that a set of family trees would have been a welcome and clarifying addition to Hyde's book. But the profusion of stories is part of her point, as she shows how the same events could affect people in disparate ways, with some adapting or even flourishing while others escaped or resisted or got crushed. Many mixed-descent people worked for the U.S. government as translators and military scouts; they were often mistrusted by others, their ability to switch between languages and cultures arousing suspicions, their loyalties held in doubt.

That same U.S. government kept making promises and then breaking them. "It waged war on Native nations but rarely enforced the law on white civilians who trespassed on Native lands," Hyde writes, explaining how the ruthless expansion of American power presented mixed-descent families with terrible choices.

In the 1860s, several members of one family, the Bents, decided that survival demanded accommodation. "Indians had to join the settler world, and quickly, or be wiped from the earth," Hyde writes, describing the family's willingness to act as a go-between on behalf of the government. Still, some of their relatives came to precisely the opposite conclusion, joining a band of Cheyenne warriors and taking up arms. Among those immediately killed by white marauders at the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 was the Cheyenne leader White Antelope, who had promised that "the whites were good people and that peace was going to be made." For some Cheyennes, every treaty that peace chiefs signed and that the U.S. government broke made violence look more sensible than acquiescence.

Hyde describes how ideas about race hardened throughout the 19th century, giving rise to the belief that a white person or an Indigenous person or, in the language of the day, a “half-breed,” was determined by “blood quantum.” A blended heritage became enshrined in policy as a matter of minute fractions and “complicated racial math,” Hyde writes — “a false precision that empowered racism as federal law.”

The effects of such fantasies have been real and deadly. Hyde wants us to see how some families found ways to endure, but there’s an irreducible grief that wends its way through this book. She quotes the Cheyenne chief Black Kettle, who survived Sand Creek but still sang a death song: “Nothing lives long, Only the earth and the mountains.”