

THE SHERIDAN PAGES: At the Heart of the Southern Cheyenne Warrior

Southern Cheyenne warriors are seldom remembered in history as being romantics. As cunning raiders, courageous soldiers and adept horsemen, they proved to be formidable opponents – arguably one of the few groups credited with slowing the westward advance of the White Man – but *romantics*? Underneath their longstanding warlike reputation, warriors of the Southern Cheyenne had a softer side. *The Sheridan Pages*, a fine collection of c. 1870 ledger drawings, demonstrate just that. Drawn by at least two warrior-artists, *The Sheridan Pages* are a rare assemblage of hand-drawn courting scenes. The pages are both biographical and autobiographical, recalling the wooing exploits of the artists and their fellow comrades. As with warfare, the Southern Cheyenne courting process was illustrious. The pages were intended to celebrate the virility and social prowess of the male protagonists.

To say this collection of pages is “rare” would be an understatement. Of the handful of known Southern Cheyenne ledger collections, only a few focus on courtship. (Ledger Art was a male-dominated art form in which the vast majority of surviving ledgers depict combat scenes.) Fewer still are surviving pages which predate the 1880s – a time when Indians were still roaming the Plains. Their rarity, age and overall condition make *The Sheridan Pages* a true find. Not only do they offer significant commentary on Plains warrior culture in the 1870s, they represent an art form that is uniquely American. Interesting too is that the pages were collected and preserved by the Sheridan family. With members like General Philip H. Sheridan (1831-1888), the family played an integral role in the shaping of Southern Cheyenne history in the 1870s.

The Southern Plains had irrevocably changed by 1870. And while the artists of *The Sheridan Pages* hardly understood “Manifest Destiny”, “The Reconstruction Era”, or the intricacies of the white man’s frontier politics, the impacts were palpable. Originally, the Southern Cheyenne broke off from their northerly ancestors, the



Two Yellow Horses
The Sheridan Pages p. 23 (detail)
Southern Cheyenne, c. 1870

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Northern Cheyenne, to pursue hunting grounds in Southern Colorado in the early 19th century. Unfortunately, the cessation of Mexico's northern territories to the United States, coupled with the discovery of gold in Colorado and California, only decades prior, forever changed the socio-political landscape. Pioneers were now crossing the Southern Plains in vast droves, armed with buffalo rifles and thoughts of fortune. The frontier was quickly disappearing along with the buffalo herds from which the Indians had subsisted. White settlements in Texas, New Mexico and Colorado were increasingly encroaching on prime hunting grounds, further exacerbating longstanding tensions. To make matters worse, after 1865, a newly united, post-Civil War US military was addressing the "Indian problem" with a renewed vigor.

In spite of these mounting pressures, many Southern Cheyenne refused to abandon their warring culture. The devastation wrought by the Sand Creek Massacre (1864) and the Washita River Battle (1868) did not deter them. While the Medicine Lodge Treaties of 1867 had in fact secured them a Reservation far away from white settlements in "Indian Territory" (current day Oklahoma), the events at Washita River and Sand Creek had only fostered distrust of US Government. The Indians would instead use these newly allotted lands to stage raids. Many of the surrounding white settlements – previously allied with the Confederacy – had been demilitarized with the onset of the Reconstruction Era. They were prime targets, rich with horses, guns and whatever else was needed. Equally vulnerable were the relocated Southeastern tribes now living in eastern Oklahoma. Southern Cheyenne warriors conducted coordinated raids alongside bands of Comanche, Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache. Defiant until the end, they roamed the Plains in what was perhaps their final gasp of nomadic freedom. This all came to a halt by 1875 when the defeated Southern Cheyenne were finally committed to Camp Supply at the conclusion of the Red River Wars.

The *esprit de corps* of these resilient warriors is at the very heart of their Ledger Art. With the Southern Plains warring culture on the verge of destruction, warriors began recording their histories in ledger books. These hardcover books – filled with sequentially numbered, lined pages – were imported into the Plains by white businessmen to keep track of financial transactions. By the mid-19th century, however, they had found their way into Indian hands and were unexpectedly repurposed. Warrior artists used the pages to draw battle scenes, courting scenes and scenes of camp life on the open Plains. (In the case of *The Sheridan Pages*, they drew courting scenes on the torn out pages of an unknown ledger book.)

The drawings depicted their successes as warriors on the Plains. They not only served as warrior medicine, they also functioned as a blueprint for younger generations of aspiring warriors. Most importantly, they affirmed the social standing of distinguished tribesmen. Lauded over campfires, ledgers were the ultimate bragging right. The episodes ensured that their legacies and oral histories would be preserved, even if their way of life would not.

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That the artists of *The Sheridan Pages* thought to create a whole sequence of pages dedicated to courting scenes is unusual. Such scenes were popular demonstrations of male virility, but few known ledger collections concentrate solely on courtship. The significance of these pages can be understood within the context of Southern Cheyenne culture. The Southern Cheyenne took great pride in their traditions, their art and their cultural identity. Almost everything that the Southern Cheyenne did was done with great care and dedication. The act of courting was no exception. Southern Cheyenne women were admired throughout the Plains for their chastity, their artistic renown and their superior work ethic. Marriage to one was a great honor and a significant undertaking. Courtship typically lasted for four to five years, during which time the suitor would seek the approval of the woman's family – particularly her father's. The suitor would give gifts and attempt to demonstrate leadership in combat. He might even consult a shaman or utilize a courting flute to aid him in his seduction. (Such flutes were deemed irresistible to women when played.) This did not ensure marriage, however, and it was normal for a woman to be pursued by multiple suitors at once. Those who beat out the competition and satisfied the family's expectations typically had significant wealth and social status within the tribe. To court and even marry one Southern Cheyenne woman of good standing was therefore a reflection of prowess. Especially adept and dedicated warriors were able to marry several.

The Sheridan Pages are a comprehensive portfolio on Southern Cheyenne courtship. Though they are seemingly non-sequential, they depict several warriors carrying out different phases of the courting process. Each page offers interesting insight into a particular warrior's experience. The action proceeds from right to left. In each scene, a male attempts to woo one or more females. Of the initial stages of Southern Cheyenne courtship, famous ethnologist George Bird Grinnell writes:



Outside the Lodge
The Sheridan Pages p. 11 (detail)
Southern Cheyenne, c. 1870

“When [a warrior] became fond of a girl, he went near to the lodge in which she lived, and, wrapped in his blanket or his robe, which was over his head and hid his features, he stood there, waiting for her to come out. When she passed, on her way to get wood or water, or on her return, he stepped up beside her, and threw his arms and his blanket around her, quite covering her person with the blanket. Then he held her fast and began to talk with her.” (Grinnell I, p.132)

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This early stage of courtship features quite prominently in *The Sheridan Pages*, where the protagonist and the heroine are conceptually drawn wrapped in a blanket. Only their moccasins can be used to distinguish each of them. Gift-giving and familial involvement also played large roles in the courting process. The male would bestow lavish gifts upon the woman's family – the most grandiose being horses. The woman's family, in turn, would reciprocate. Being a successful warrior ensured better gifts and increased the likelihood of a successful courtship.

On certain pages, the relationship between the male and female has matured. Herein, we begin to notice that the female takes on more of an identity. Her head and facial features are no longer obscured by a blanket, for example. Instead, she is drawn in increasing detail and, in some cases, is even given a pictorial glyph so that she can be identified by name. At perhaps the most advanced stages of the relationship, she is drawn with red circles on her cheeks and is lavishly dressed. In the 1931, a Southern Cheyenne woman narrated her

experience about getting married as a young woman in the late 19th century. Sitting in her future husband's tipi, she recalled that "women brought in many shawls, dresses, rings, bracelets, leggings, and moccasins. They then had me change clothes. They braided my hair and painted my face with red dots on my cheeks." (Michelson, p.5-7) Within *The Sheridan Pages*, there are a handful of scenes which depict women with red cheeks. If the account above is at all indicative of Southern Cheyenne courting rituals, it can be surmised that these women are quite far along in their relationships. It could even be that they are married to the protagonist.



Two Couples in Blankets
The Sheridan Pages p. 12 (detail)
Southern Cheyenne, c. 1870

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The book from which *The Sheridan Pages* were uncovered. On the front cover, a white sticker reads, "Indian book belonging to John L. Sheridan". The loose pages were found inside, tucked inside the front cover.

Even though the Kiowa, Sioux and the Arapaho men were all producing ledger drawings, the Southern Cheyenne had a superior sense of detail, composition and draftsmanship. The Southern Cheyenne ledger artists adapted and improved upon artistic conventions that had for centuries been used on rock faces, tipis and buffalo robes. In *The Sheridan Pages*, for example, great attention is paid to clothing and objects. The Southern Plains was home to a highly complex trade network – one that extended from Mexico, across Texas and up through the Rocky Mountains. As such, the Southern Cheyenne had access to a variety of trade goods: umbrellas, silver headstalls, Saltillo serapes and Navajo blankets. These are but a few of the things that can be seen in *The Sheridan Pages*. The men are dressed in calico shirts, commercially made breech cloths, hide leggings and fringed moccasins; the women are dressed in high-top moccasins and

dresses, each fastened by a German Silver belt. In many of the drawings, both the man and woman are wrapped in trade blankets accented with beaded blanket strips. Even the horses in *The Sheridan Pages* are lavishly decorated with Mexican-made equine gear. All these items helped to demonstrate the wealth of the couple and, consequently, the strength of their potential union. They also give us great insight into Southern Cheyenne material culture.

That *The Sheridan Pages* have survived is likely due to their unique collection history. At Camp Supply, where the Southern Cheyenne were located after the Red River Wars, it was naively thought that the nomadic Southern Cheyenne would take to farming as many Eastern tribes had. While the camp was charged with protecting the Southern Cheyenne, its nominal function was to supply General Philip H. Sheridan's aggressive Indian campaigns. Philip's brother, John L. Sheridan (1837-1898), a trained lawyer and certified in land registry, was brought into the camp in the mid-70s to assist with its operations. It was John who collected *The Sheridan Pages* and it is after him that these pages have been named.

John likely acquired these pages in the late 1870s, not long after the trading post scandals in the late 70s forced a restructuring and, consequently, his eventual resignation. John's relationship to Philip would have been the likely cause. Due to

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trader scandals nearby at Fort Sill in 1876, many agents came under increasing scrutiny for collusion, bribery and cronyism with regard to the handling of Indian annuities. Since their acquisition, *The Sheridan Pages* have remained in the Sheridan family and have been handed down by descent. The loose pages were discovered tucked beneath the inside cover of another book, one belonging to John L. Sheridan. It is perhaps for this reason that the pages, in spite of their age, were so well preserved. To date, the identities of the artists remain unclear.

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