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Case Study: *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo*

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Overview

The making and distribution of *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo* shows how a network of feminist activists and scholars working with public-spirited citizens in New York and Oklahoma



brought the dramatic story of an important but little-known writer of American Indian history to national public television audiences. It demonstrates how the telling of little-known stories that enrich our view of American history can be enabled by a vital web of cultural activists and public institutions.

Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo is a one-hour documentary film about a woman historian whose scholarship, which began in the 1930s in a social climate hostile to female scholars and to “history from the bottom up,” became central to the new Native American social history that came to the fore in the early 1970s.

The production and circulation of the film was supported by individuals and institutions – including libraries, foundations, academic institutions, and public media organizations -- who believed this regional story was significant for a national audience, as well as schools, tribal and community groups. It was nationally broadcast on PBS on November 15, 1988 on the WGBH series, American Experience, and was distributed from 1989 to 2003 by PBS Video. This report traces the reciprocal relationship between a network of individuals, public organizations and civic groups - and the consequences for the long term life of the film.

Background

In 1983, Glenna Matthews and Gloria Valencia-Weber, feminist faculty members at Oklahoma State University, approached me about making a documentary film about Angie Debo. WOSU-FM, the Oklahoma State University NPR station, had broadcast a series of their oral histories with Debo, who was then in her 90s, and they wanted to take their project further. Given her age, time was obviously of the essence. At that time, I was head of media projects at the Institute for Research in History in New York City, an organization of independent feminist historians (much like Debo), and it seemed a perfect fit. I brought in Martha Sandlin, a newly-minted NYU film school graduate originally from Oklahoma, and together we produced the film, which was directed by Sandlin.

The social and institutional environment within which the film project evolved was shaped by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, which gave voice to women, people of color, and working people, and triggered the transformation of master narratives of American history. We worked with a network of individuals, institutions and programs that had developed out of these struggles and who saw themselves as builders of civic life more broadly. This network provided the financial and cultural resources for the production and circulation of the film, and was instrumental in ensuring its wide reach and long life.

To the feminist historians and filmmakers who “discovered” her in the 1980s, Angie Debo exemplified the talented women who had long been excluded from professional life. Entering the field of history in the 1930s, she was unable to find an academic position in what was then an all-

male historical profession, despite her outstanding graduate work at the University of Chicago. She became an independent scholar and author of nine books of Western and Indian history, and a forceful advocate for Indian land and water rights. In the 1970s, her books became the bedrock of the New Native American History and her scholarship was invoked in federal court decisions and Indian policy reforms.

The Film

Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo is a character study of 98-year old Angie Debo, living in her home town of Marshall, Oklahoma (pop 354), as she reflects on her life and struggles to publish the truth of Oklahoma history in a hostile political climate. It follows her career in a harsh, if not dangerous political environment, as she tracks down and reveals the systematic criminal activities of politicians and the U.S. government in their dealings with the Indian tribes of Oklahoma.

Angie Debo labored in relative professional isolation until the 1970s, when the feminist and civil rights movements spurred interest in the historical significance of once-marginalized people, and identified them as active historical agents. Debo's books were required reading in newly-established programs in Native American studies, and became (at least in academic press terms) best sellers. Her scholarship, which incorporated Native perspectives and cultural life, was cited in landmark Indian tribal sovereignty cases and introduced into Indian law programs.



In order to legitimize the scholarly significance of Debo's work and raise it beyond regional Southwest interest, we at the Institute for Research in History assembled a panel of scholarly advisors and organized presentations at national conferences of the Organization of American Historians, the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, and the American Historical Association, for whom we also wrote newsletter articles. With support from Oklahoma State University staff and a small grant from the Oklahoma Humanities Council, 16 mm location filming began in 1984. It was the first of five location shoots, all of which depended upon the availability of our frail central character, and the willingness of local citizens including Apaches and members of the Creek Nation, to share their memories, documents, and resources.

In Oklahoma, a network of women scholars, foundation program officers, and civic activists (many of whom had not been aware of Debo's work) began to mobilize production support for the film, the final budget for which was \$650,000. Through them, we gained entree to influential citizens, historical societies and libraries, and especially to financial support. Urged by scholars and citizens active in public education, the Oklahoma Humanities Council awarded the project grants totaling \$75,000, a major commitment for a state humanities council with limited funds and for a project as risky as a film production. Penny Williams, a state legislator, opened her Rolodex and wrote a solicitation letter which produced more than 100 contributions, ranging from \$15 from a couple in Stroud City, Oklahoma to \$15,000 from the John T Noble Foundation. This fund-raising effort not only brought together New York filmmakers and Oklahoma citizens across cultural divides, it effectively created a community of stake holders who saw Angie Debo's story as a counter to conventional Western histories that valorize the

accomplishments of white men. This network of civic activists provided access to the schools, libraries, museums, and other public institutions through which the completed film circulated in public screenings, school curricula, discussion programs, and Chautauqua-style events in Oklahoma.

As a direct result of the film, Penny Williams and Anne Morgan of the oil-fortune based Kerr Foundation, led a drive to commission Debo's portrait (the first of a woman) to hang in the State legislature, which now hangs in the Rotunda alongside favorite sons Jim Thorpe and Will Rogers, as well as several of the politicians whose crimes Debo detailed in her books. At what was locally called "the hanging", the governor and state political leaders publicly honored Debo – the first such recognition she had ever received in her home state. This imprimatur would later reassure corporate funders, such as the Oklahoma Natural Gas Foundation, which provided finishing funds and sponsored the premier screening in Washington, D.C., which was attended by Senator David Boren and other members of the state congressional delegation.

Broadcast Release

Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo was nationally broadcast on PBS on November 15, 1988 at 10:00 pm, in the premiere season of the WGBH series, American Experience. It received a 1.1 rating.

In 1987, in a time of funding desperation, I heard that WGBH was launching American Experience, a new series on American history. It was initiated in a decade that saw a surge in the production of historical documentaries that was stimulated by 1) the interest of once-marginalized communities in rediscovering (and validating) their own suppressed and forgotten histories, 2) the availability of NEH funding, which encouraged cooperation between scholars and filmmakers, and 3) U.S. Bicentennial celebrations, which often highlighted the contributions of immigrant and regional groups in the national narrative.

The quality of this work and lively public interest encouraged WGBH to create a series led by a respected network documentary veteran, Judith Crichton, and vetted by an advisory committee of distinguished historians. The series had a conventional format--contemporary witnesses/experts, archival film, and voice-over narrative—and was pitched to a broad PBS audience. Its popular tone was reminiscent of Life magazine, as was its inclusive view of the American scene, but Crichton also pushed the boundaries of both content and style. (The series opened with Robert Stone's *Radio Bikini*, a searing inquiry into US atomic-bomb testing and its aftermath for native populations.)

Crichton, who strongly supported the film and chose it for the second slot in the opening season of the series, was queried by the WGBH programming committee about giving prime time visibility to a regional historian who had never held a prestigious academic position. When Yale historian Howard Lamar, a member of Crichton's advisory committee, testified to Debo's significance to Western American and Native American history, WGBH signed on to the project, eventually providing \$350,000 in finishing funds. In return, the final contract between the Institute for Research in History and WGBH-TV granted creative control and distribution rights to American Experience. Copyright was held jointly by the Institute (now defunct) and WGBH-TV (which has no apparent further interest in the film).

The broadcast was never repeated, but the film went into educational distribution through PBS video, in a deal that split royalties three ways (after the PBS cut) between WGBH and the two co-producers. While *American Experience* publicized the show as part of the launch of the new series (including a feature article in *TV Guide*), they provided little information to the producers on reviews and other press coverage. There were several reviews in historical journals, which focused on the quality of the film as an historical narrative – contributing to an emerging debate in the profession about the relationship between visual history and the canons of written history.

Outcomes

The film contributed to the increased public visibility and appreciation of Angie Debo's work and influence. Following the broadcast, sales of Debo's books spiked and all nine of Debo's books were reprinted by Oklahoma University Press. (Her classic work, *And Still the Waters Run*, which was rejected by Oklahoma University Press under political pressure in the 1930s and later published by Princeton University Press, was recently named by Princeton, in a double-page spread in the *NY Review of Books*, as one of their "100 most important titles" of the twentieth century.)



In 1988, Debo received the Lifetime Achievement Award of The American Historical Association, as a direct result of the efforts of a group of feminist historians including Natalie Zemon Davis, a distinguished professor at Princeton University who became aware of Debo through the film. Texas writer Larry McMurtry, whose many works include *Lonesome Dove*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *Hud*, wrote an appreciation of Debo's influence on his own career in the *NY Review of Books*—perhaps not a direct result of the film, but part of a larger public acknowledgement of her work. In 1989, *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo* received the prestigious Organization of American Historian's Erik Barnouw Award for best historical documentary, which helped to launch it into educational distribution.

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Marketing

PBS Video targeted colleges and high schools, as well as libraries. A special educational version was prepared, accompanied by a teacher's guide. After primary markets were exhausted, the film was packaged thematically with other titles in women's history, Native American history, the American West, and Indian law. The film is taught in college courses in Western history, women's history, and Native American history. It is cited in scholarly articles on Indian law, and is included in law school syllabi in Indian law.

From 1989-2003, when the distribution agreement lapsed, PBS Video sold approximately 4,000 videotapes, principally to schools and libraries. The co-producers were unable to obtain any detailed information from PBS or WGBH, which controlled the agreement, about distribution strategies or results. (The figures quoted here are extrapolated from my own royalty statements.) A recent inquiry to WGBH by a citizen group in Oklahoma interested in picking up the license on the occasion of Oklahoma's upcoming Centennial celebrations, received no reply.

The film's after-broadcast royalties were impressive, reflecting the institutional pricing scale which began at \$250 and was later scaled to \$99.95 and less. It surely benefited from video distribution, which made the film more accessible to technology-challenged schools than 16mm had been. But it was released before home video was widely available. Judging from the many inquiries I have received on a purely informal basis from individuals ranging from Indian rights activists to history buffs; it thereby lost another potential avenue of distribution.

Were the film to be re-released today, rights issues would likely not be a great problem. Most of the archival material is in the public domain, and the music was commissioned for the program.

Conclusion

The long life of *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo* was the result of a unique partnership between feminist scholars and activists and a civic network which sought to bring public recognition to the work of a unique and influential historian and which brought substantial resource to the production and circulation of the film. This story of one person's life enabled its supporters to bring public attention to larger issues: i.e., the politics of history telling, the centrality of Native American history to the larger American story, the exclusion of women from the professions, the vital importance of publishing and public education to democratic life, and the role of women and Native Americans in Oklahoma life and culture.



This group mobilized substantial resources for both the production and circulation of the film in a period that has been shaped by the civil rights and feminist movements that brought new voices into public life and transformed the master narrative of American history. The agendas (and even the existence) of the institutions and programs that provided the resources for making the film--which included publicly-funded organizations like the Oklahoma Humanities Council, non-profit groups like the feminist Institute for Research in History, and the affirmative action programs of Oklahoma State University—represented the priorities and values of the members of those movements.

Coda

On October 1, 2004, the Angie Debo Papers at the Oklahoma State University Library were declared a National Literary Landmark of the Library of Congress. The keynote speaker was Gloria Valencia-Weber who, after graduating from Harvard Law School as a “mature returning student of color,” went on to establish the model Indian Law Certificate Program at the University of New Mexico School of Law, which is now being replicated on other campuses. She and other speakers described the impact of Debo's work on transformations in Native American and Western history, on U.S. Court decisions regarding tribal sovereignty and land claims, and on federal Indian policies. *Indians, Outlaws, and Angie Debo* was screened at the start and conclusion of the event. Local speakers described the incorporation of the film Debo's writing into grade school and high school curricula, and talked of Debo as an honored figure in the upcoming Oklahoma Centennial celebrations.

The ceremony in October, 2004 is evidence of the continuing influence of the film in bringing Debo and the history she wrote about into public visibility. It was there I discovered that the film is shown in Indian law programs; in women's history courses at the University of California

at Berkeley; and in junior high school classes in San Antonio, Texas. It was also there that a group of public-spirited citizens expressed their desire to bring the public television station into an effort to obtain the distribution license that WGBH has let lapse. School teachers and librarians asked how to purchase new tapes to replace ones worn with use. These anecdotal examples suggest the extended life that is still possible for *Indians, Outlaws and Angie Debo*. It is also a testament to the vitality of civic and educational networks that contribute to the healthy life to independent media.