

Preaching in Silence:

Isabel Crawford and Indian Sign Language

MARILYN FÄRDIG WHITELEY

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ABSTRACT

Isabel Crawford (1865-1961) was born in Canada, the daughter of a Baptist preacher and his wife. A severe illness when she was eighteen caused her to lose most of her hearing, but nevertheless she enrolled in the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago in 1891. Following her graduation she was appointed a missionary to the Kiowa in southwestern Oklahoma. Because of her deafness, she learned Plains Indian sign language. Her ability to communicate with signs contributed significantly to the great success of her mission. In 1906 she left Oklahoma, and for many years she did deputations work on behalf of the American Baptist Women's Home Mission Society. She regularly concluded her presentations by signing the Twenty-third Psalm while in Indian dress, thus becoming a bridge between her audience and "the others" who needed their support. Her silent preaching had helped create a strong bond with the Kiowas, and following her death in Ontario, her body was returned to Oklahoma for burial in the Indian cemetery on her mission.

In the fall of 1883, John Crawford left Rapid City, Manitoba, to take up a pastorate in the Dakota Territory. He left behind his wife, Sarah, and his eighteen-year-old daughter, Isabel, to close up Prairie College, which he had founded three years earlier. All Baptist theological education was to be centralized in Toronto, and John Crawford's dream had failed. Isabel worked hard, caring for the requirements of the few students who remained in order to take in the harvest, but later in the fall she became ill. For six months she lay in bed with pain and fever. The doctor put her on a diet of milk and gave her quinine. Gradually she recovered, but the quinine that she credited with saving her life also robbed her of much of her hearing. That impairment would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Yet despite her extremely limited hearing, Isabel Crawford spent thirteen years as a successful missionary for the American Baptists among the Kiowa Indians in southwestern Oklahoma. There she learned to communicate in Plains Indian sign language. After leaving her Oklahoma post, she became a popular speaker on behalf of the Women's Home Mission Society, and she regularly closed her presentations by signing the Twenty-third Psalm. This paper explores the impact of Crawford's use of sign language both in her mission activity and in her long career of deputations work after she left the Oklahoma reservation.

Isabel Crawford was born in 1865 in Cheltenham, Ontario, north of Toronto. Her parents were Irish and had emigrated to Canada in about 1858; her father, John Crawford, was a Baptist minister. Isabel grew up in Woodstock, Ontario, after her father became professor of theology at the Canadian Literary Institute there. At sixteen, she moved with her parents to Manitoba when her father opened Prairie College outside Rapid City, Manitoba. After its closing, she lived with her parents in the Dakota Territory, where her father held a pastorate. Then her parents returned to Canada. John Crawford held a pastorate in Wingham, Ontario, for eight months. Then he retired, and Isabel's parents moved in with one of their daughters and her family in Toronto. Both parents put high values on education and on Christian service, so it is not surprising that, in 1891, when she was no longer

needed at home, Isabel Crawford entered the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago.

Crawford graduated from the training school in June of 1893. Hoping for a foreign posting, she was dismayed when the Women's Home Mission Society appointed her to the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation in the Oklahoma Territory. The secretary of the society explained that, unlike foreign missionaries who were expected to learn the local language, missionaries among Native Americans worked with interpreters so, she wrote, "you being deaf wont [sic] interfere with your work." Crawford observed, "Why I never thought being deaf any handicap. I just took it for granted."¹ Reluctantly she agreed to take up her assignment. (Gradually she not only accepted it but became closely attached to the Kiowas and also a strong advocate of Indian rights, but that's another paper.)

Isabel Crawford and another young missionary arrived at Elk Creek on November 23, and a week later they held their first sewing meeting. Lone Wolf, the Kiowa chief whose appeal two years earlier had brought Baptist missionaries to the reservation, interpreted. He did so "with so much feeling," wrote Crawford, "that I could scarcely keep the tears back."² But Lone Wolf had his own responsibilities, and Crawford needed a regular interpreter. In August of 1894, as she prepared to end her first furlough and return to Elk Creek, she was happy to learn from the mission society that she would have one who would "go to all meetings" with her.³ But when she

1 Notebook 15 [1951], Barbara Cross McKinnon collection, Guelph, Ontario.

2 Journal 1893–1894, November 30, 1893, 37. Most of the writings of Isabel Crawford are found in the Isabel Crawford Collection of the denominational archives of the American Baptist Historical Society (ABHS). The collection includes Crawford's journals and diaries from 1891 through 1948 as well as one unlabeled journal from 1954. In addition, the collection contains a number of notebooks, generally three-ring binders. Any footnote that does not include another specific reference is from the Isabel Crawford Collection of the ABHS. Each note gives the name of the book (e.g., Journal 1902), followed by whatever specific location is provided; sometimes the date of the entry is available, sometimes the page number(s), and sometimes both. (Crawford's final journals are in the possession of her grandniece Barbara Cross McKinnon, of Guelph, Ontario.)

3 Journal 1893–1894, August 9, 1894, 98.

returned, George Hicks, Baptist missionary at Elk Creek, often required the interpreter's services, and Crawford was left without anyone to help her "tell the gospel."⁴ She was frustrated.

There was, however, another possibility. Europeans arriving in the sixteenth century in the area that became Texas and northern Mexico observed Native Americans using a sign language that facilitated communication between tribes with different spoken languages. What came to be known as Plains Indian sign language was widely used among the Kiowas and their neighbors.

One of the Elk Creek men, Koptah, felt sorry for Crawford because of her lack of hearing, and he decided to help her. Thus he took it upon himself to teach her sign language, coming from his teepee almost every day to teach her new signs.⁵ By the time she left for her first furlough, in June of 1894, she had been able to communicate somewhat using signs,⁶ and after she returned, her education continued. During the following months she reported in her journal that she had "carried on quite a little sign conversation" and "had a long talk on different subjects, all by signs."⁷

Crawford preferred to lead meetings using an interpreter, but many times none was available. Sometimes George Hicks needed the interpreter, and other times the interpreter had functions to perform elsewhere. One day, for instance, "[t]wo white men came to buy horses," and the interpreter went to facilitate their negotiations rather than to the meeting that Crawford was leading. She wrote in her journal, "Billy tried it but preferred my signing."⁸ Another time an interpreter from another mission was present, but he "wouldn't interpret for he said all could understand my sign talking so I went ahead."⁹ Thus she began to use sign language to tell people about what they termed the Jesus Road.

4 Journal 1893–1894, November 22, 1894, 22.

5 Journal 1894–1896, October 29, 1894, 38.

6 Journal 1893–1894, June 20, 1894, 80.

7 Journal 1894–1896, January 1, 1895, 51, and June 22, 1895, 133.

8 Journal 1893–1894, December 2, 1894, 44.

9 Journal 1893–1894, July 24, 1895, 142.

After she had been at Elk Creek for two years, Isabel Crawford became restless. The small Elk Creek settlement was served by George Hicks and his wife as well as by Crawford, while larger groups of Kiowas had no one. When she was invited by the local chief to move to Saddle Mountain, about thirty miles away, Crawford asked the Indian agent about relocating there. He replied, "It is perfectly safe if you can stand the roughing it, and a good location for a mission."¹⁰ Without consulting the board of the Women's Baptist Home Mission Society, she agreed to go alone to begin a mission at Saddle Mountain. In April of 1896, she made the move.

At Saddle Mountain, Crawford found many Kiowas receptive to the gospel message. Among them was Lucius Aitsan. He had been educated at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and had served as an interpreter for other missionaries, but he had not been converted. He became Crawford's interpreter. Since there was no other missionary at Saddle Mountain to claim Aitsan's time, Crawford was able to rely on his assistance more regularly than she had the interpreter at Elk Creek. But Aitsan was not always available, and Crawford continued to sign as needed.

And of course a missionary's work was not confined to formal services. At Saddle Mountain as at Elk Creek, Crawford held sewing meetings—meetings for both women and men. Crawford used these occasions not only to teach useful skills and to assist the Kiowas in making quilts to sell to support the cost of the church they hoped to build. They also provided Crawford with the opportunity to teach Bible lessons. For this she could use signs.

Crawford lived right among the people of Saddle Mountain, at first in a tent and then in the house of Lucius Aitsan and his wife until eventually a house was built for her. Thus she had close, direct contact with the people and their daily lives. She dealt with death, too, when it came all too often to the camp. When a child died, the parents mourned deeply. Traditionally they cut off their hair and a finger, as well. Crawford tried to bring them comfort. She wrote of the death of a girl about five years old:

10 Journal 1894–1896, insider the back cover.

The sting of death is the same the world over, and those stricken parents after placing the lifeless body in my arms gave themselves over to uncontrollable weeping, Mingling my tears with theirs I signed: “Jesus has taken your child to sit down with Him. He does not want you to cut off your fingers. He wants you to give your hearts to Him.” The only box that would make a coffin was full of chips. Emptying it I made a lid, lined and covered the whole with white, and printed across the top: “Not dead, but living with Jesus.” The interpreter was away but the wonderful resurrection story was signed into the hearts, bringing for a moment a holy calm.¹¹

Crawford’s work at Saddle Mountain enjoyed the success for which she had only longed at Elk Creek. Lucius Aitsan and his wife were the first to be baptized, and they were followed by many others. Crawford formed the converts, both women and men, into a missionary society, and they made quilts to sell when Indians from many camps gathered to receive their government allotments. The money went toward establishing a mission on the Hopi Indian reservation and also toward building a church at Saddle Mountain. The first service in the new building was held on Easter of 1903; the building was dedicated and a congregation organized that August.

At the end of 1906, after thirteen years on the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation, Isabel Crawford left Oklahoma. Because of a dispute in which she was supported by the women’s mission board but criticized by the denomination’s mission board, she felt that her influence had been irreparably undermined and she could no longer provide leadership on the mission.¹² She did, however, remain in the employ of the women’s home mission society, doing deputations work on its behalf, travelling from coast to coast, speaking in churches and at larger gatherings.

11 Isabel Crawford, *Kiowa: A Woman Missionary in Indian Territory*, with introduction by Clyde Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 57.

12 For details of this controversy, see Chapter 6, “The Jesus Eat,” in my book, *The Life of Isabel Crawford: More Than I Asked For* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015).

Even in her leisure time, Crawford showed her interest in bringing the Christian message to Native Americans. In May of 1908, she went with a friend to a performance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in New York City. Upon being introduced to William Cody, she asked in sign language if she might talk with the Indians in the show. He agreed to let her see them after the performance in their dining quarters. In her journal she wrote, "It wasn't long before I was talking with the Indians & they were all attention. How did this white woman learn the sign language? I told them I was 14 years among the Indians & loved them very much. Their white chief only knew their faces I knew their hearts. One old man signed, 'This is good. You talk & laugh & open your heart to us. You are not hiding anything. This is what we like.'"¹³

Later she wrote to Cody, asking whether he would "loan" her his Indians On Sunday, May 24. She explained, "You won't make any money out of the loan for it is only a missionary who is making the proposition & all she wants to do is to give the Indians the gospel & bring to them the sympathy & encouragement of one who has spent 14 years among them & has learned to love them."¹⁴ Cody did not reply, and Crawford had no opportunity to carry out that ministry.

Crawford's desire to work with Native Americans remained strong, and so in 1913 she accepted appointment as General Missionary in eastern Washington. Here, too, she was able to communicate using signs.¹⁵ There was not enough work, however, to justify her long-term appointment, so soon she returned to the speaker's platform. In 1915 she again had the opportunity to work directly among the Indians, this time on the four Seneca and Tuscarora reservations in western New York. She left the New York work in 1921 and returned to her role as a speaker on behalf of the women's mission society. This she continued until her retirement in 1930.

Even after leaving Oklahoma, Crawford remained in contact with the Kiowas, and she visited Saddle Mountain several times. She was always

13 Journal 1906–1908, May 9, 1908, 379.

14 Ibid., May 24, 1908, 385.

15 Journal 1914–1915, 4.

warmly welcomed, and the people begged her to return. In 1905 the church had been censured by the Oklahoma Indian Baptist Association for allowing one of its deacons to serve the Lord's Supper, an action recommended by Crawford since the congregation had no pastor. Crawford refused to work there unless the "black mark" against the church was erased. Following her visit to Saddle Mountain in 1928, the current minister and his congregation began work toward that end. The offending motion was rescinded the next year, and it looked as though Crawford's return might be possible. The denominational board expressed strong objections to the women's board, however, and the hopes of both Crawford and the congregation were dashed. Her love for the Kiowas at Saddle Mountain remained strong, and their appreciation and affection for her persisted for decades.¹⁶

Several factors mark Crawford's distinct relationship with the Elk Creek and Saddle Mountain Kiowas. They were painfully aware of the injustices that their tribe had suffered at the hands of white men and so they wanted no white "Jesus man" to work among them. But Crawford was a woman, and she gained acceptance in both communities by working with the women and teaching them useful skills. They also accepted her because of her irenic spirit; early in her days at Saddle Mountain she felt directed by God to tell those assembled "that I had not come to scold them & tell them their road was a bad one but had come to them to help them learn a better way."¹⁷ She lived among them, suffered with them when food supplies were low, and shared their sorrows when disease and death entered the camps.

Yet one of the most significant factors was that she brought them the Christian message in their own language, not the spoken Kiowa language that she could not understand and would not even have heard unless someone spoke directly into her "conversation tube," but Plains Indian sign language

16 On Thanksgiving Day in 2004, I visited the Saddle Mountain cemetery and took a few pictures. Later I posted one on a web site and mapped its location. In October of 2008, more than a century after Crawford left Saddle Mountain, I received a comment on the photograph by someone who lived nearby and had learned through conversation on my photo's page of my interest in Crawford. He closed his comment by stating "A great lady . . . so much of our history." (Comment to the author, October 8, 2008; ellipsis original.)

17 Diary 1896–1897, April 26, 1896, 106–7.

that she had labored to learn. During her visit in 1930, one of the members testified, “When Miss C came among our tribe there were very few who could speak English. God must have planned for Miss C for she could talk to these people with signs. She was able to talk to any old Indians & understand each other.”¹⁸

When Crawford left her Oklahoma mission, her activity as a speaker on behalf of the women’s mission society did not signal the end of her use of Plains Indian sign language. As she traveled giving missionary addresses, she drew upon an earlier experience. In 1898, she had attended a missionary convention in San Francisco. There the secretary of the women’s board of home missions announced that Crawford would present something in Plains Indian sign language the next morning. Crawford wrote,

When I woke in the morning I lay in bed wondering what I would give. Not having a good memory I knew few things off by heart. I went over them. The multiplication tables (especially five times) & “Now I lay me down to sleep,” The Lord’s Prayer, The 23rd Psalm. All of which mother had *caused me to know* by constant repetitions. “Five times” would be a crazy thing to give. *Prayers* with signing out of the question. Only the 23rd Psalm was left & with the others in their beds quietly snoozing I thought out how I would give it to the Indians if I had no interpreter. I gave it at the devotionals and the Good Shepherd blessed it.¹⁹

Crawford recognized the interest raised by her action, and in her deputations work she took up the practice of closing her presentations by signing the psalm. She frequently increased the impact of this by wearing an “Indian costume.”²⁰ In her exotic performance, she represented the otherness of Native Americans on behalf of whom she spoke, thus becoming a bridge between her audience and those who needed their support, support that those present could offer by contributing to the mission society’s funds.

18 Journal 1930–1931, December 27, 1930, 94.

19 Notebook California, May, 24, 1898 [*sic*].

20 Journal 1908–1910, January 16, 1909, 35.

Isabel Crawford “translated” back into English the signing she had developed for the psalm. Here are the words:

The Great Father above a shepherd Chief is the same as, and I am His, and with Him I want not.

He throws out to me a rope. The name of the rope is Love. He draws me, and draws me, and draws me to where the grass is green and the water not dangerous; and I eat and lie down satisfied.

Some days this soul of mine is very weak, and falls down, but He raises it up again and draws me into “trails” that are good. His name is Wonderful!

Sometime, it may be in a little time, it may be longer and it may be a long, long time, I do not know, He will draw me into a place between mountains. It is dark there, but I will pull back not, and I will be afraid not, for it is in there between those mountains that the Great Shepherd Chief will meet me, and the hunger I have felt in my heart all through this life will be satisfied. Sometimes this rope that is Love He makes into a whip, and He whips me, and whips me, but afterward He gives me a staff to lean on.

He spreads a table before me and puts on it different kinds of food; buffalo meat, Chinamen’s food, white men’s food, and we all sit down and eat that which satisfies us. He puts His hand upon my head and all the “tired” is gone. He fills my cup till it runs over.

Now what I have been telling you is true. I talk two ways, not. These roads that are “away ahead” good will stay with me all through this life, and afterward I will move to the “Big Tepee” and sit down with the Shepherd Chief forever.²¹

21 *The Twenty-third Psalm As Rendered by Isabel Crawford In The Indian Sign Language*, (Philadelphia: Judson Press, n.d. [1919]).

In 1919, the denomination's Judson Press published a leaflet. On each page it gave a portion of the text and a picture of Crawford, in costume, signing a significant word. Widely distributed, this pamphlet further reinforced in people's minds the connection of Crawford with Indian sign language. Years later, a woman wrote to her, "[M]any of us have heard and seen you give in the Indian sign language that gem of Scripture, the 23rd Psalm and . . . our responsibility for the First Americans has been made more vivid."²²

Crawford also saw a way to use sign language to connect people of a younger generation to missions. For one week in July of 1918, she conducted a class in Indian sign language at a camp for girls in Northfield, Massachusetts. She wrote, "I hope some of the girls caught a vision of higher things through it."²³

In May of 1941, shortly before her seventy-sixth birthday, Isabel Crawford arrived in Wichita, Kansas, for the national Baptist convention. There she participated in a pageant in which she signed the Twenty-third Psalm as she had done so many times before. The following day, a woman said to Crawford's hostess, "I heard Miss Crawford give that Psalm years ago, when I was a girl & I never forgot her or it. The proxy was perfect even the voice sounded natural." When the hostess replied that "it was no proxy it was the real thing the woman put up her two hands & said 'Why I thought Miss Crawford passed away years ago.'"²⁴ For a whole generation of American Baptists, the psalm and Plains Indian sign language were firmly connected with Crawford's identity.

Early the following year, in 1942, Isabel Crawford returned to Canada to stay with two nieces. She lived another nineteen years, dying in November of 1961 at the age of ninety-six. She had not been permitted to return to Saddle Mountain to live, but now she kept a promise she had made decades earlier. Following Crawford's funeral in Ontario, one of her nieces accompanied her body to Oklahoma, where it was buried in the

22 Journal 1940–1941, letter from Martha E. Hoop.

23 Journal 1917–1918, 107.

24 Journal 1941–1942, 12.

Kiowa cemetery at the site of her beloved Saddle Mountain. Six descendants of her converts served as pallbearers, and the service was conducted mainly in English but also in the Kiowa language. At Crawford's direction, the inscription on her grave marker reads "I dwell among mine own people."

Isabel Crawford could not hear the language of the Kiowas, but learning Plains Indian sign language enabled her not only to bring them the Christian message but also to forge a strong bond with them and earn her their trust. They had asked her to be buried among them and intercede for them on the Judgement Day "because," they said, "you can speak better than we can."²⁵ Isabel Crawford's silent speech had become a powerful agent for communicating the gospel.

25 *Kiowa County Star-Review*, November 23, 1961.