

Frank Hamilton Cushing

(1857-1900)

A pioneer ethnologist whose work at Zuni Pueblo made him one of the most important white observers of Native American culture in the nineteenth century, Frank Hamilton Cushing was, in his methods and thinking, a forerunner of anthropologists in our own century.

Cushing was born July 22, 1857, in the town of Northeast, in Pennsylvania's Erie county. In 1870 the Cushings moved to western New York, where their thirteen-year-old son quickly began to pursue the interests which would mark his adult life. Somewhat socially awkward and bookish, he was allowed to read on his own and to wander the nearby forests at will. He soon became fascinated by the Indian artifacts nearby, and curiosity drove him to experiment with making arrowheads. At age fifteen, using the bone handle of an old toothbrush and some discarded flint, he succeeded in making an arrowhead indistinguishable from those thousands of years old. This accomplishment attracted the interest of the American ethnological profession, and young Cushing published his first scientific paper in 1874 at age seventeen.

Cushing's career advanced quickly after this early start. In 1875 he briefly enrolled at Cornell University, where his required coursework paled in interest next to the preparation of an exhibition of Indian artifacts. He was soon made curator of the exhibit. That achievement and his earlier publication caught the attention of the Smithsonian Institution, whose director made him, at nineteen years of age, curator of the ethnological department of the National Museum in Washington, D.C. In the nation's capital Cushing found himself at the intellectual heart of American ethnology, and John Wesley Powell, explorer and head of the newly-formed Bureau of American Ethnology, took a particular interest in his intellectual promise.

In 1879, Powell chose Cushing to accompany him on an expedition to New Mexico, where the group spent several months observing the Zuni Pueblo. Fascinated by the wealth of living material before his eyes, Cushing gained permission to stay behind for more study. He decided to attempt to live among the Zuni as much as possible, and brazenly moved into one of the rooms of a Zuni leader. After several months, his inquisitive sketching of Zuni ceremonies led to several confrontations with angry residents. According to Cushing's account, it was only his brandishing of a knife which saved his life and earned him the respect of much of the town.

After the confrontation, Cushing was able to live much more casually among the Zuni and thus to acquaint himself with their daily lives, material culture and even some of their most secret religious ceremonies. For example, in 1881, the second year of his residence, he was initiated into the secret "Priesthood of the Bow." Perhaps the secret to his remarkable acceptance by the Zuni was his willingness to participate in their culture, by giving as well as receiving. Cushing would tell European and American folk tales, for example, as he asked the Zuni to tell him their own myths. And in 1882, he took a small group of Zuni leaders on a tour of the United States, showing them his culture as they had shown him their own.

The Zuni received enormous attention from the media and the Eastern elite during their tour, which was typical of the spectacle mounted whenever Indians visited "civilized" society. But Cushing's relationship with the Zuni made this visit extraordinary. The trip was also important to Cushing's personal life, as he was married to Washington D.C. resident Emily Tennison on July 10, 1882.

Cushing returned to the Zuni pueblo for more study in late 1882, but frequent illnesses, his spending of much government money, and his controversial involvement in a Zuni-Navajo clash led the Bureau of Ethnology to call him back to Washington in 1884. He continued his scholarly work on the Zuni, however, writing extensively about their material culture, language, and folklore. In 1886 he gained the backing of a wealthy New York patron, which enabled him to return to New Mexico, but ill health at first impeded, then ultimately ended, this final research excursion.

Besides his studies of the Zuni, the other major projects of Cushing's career were the discovery of rich archeological troves yielding important information about the Florida Indians, the exploration and description of abandoned Indian villages in the Southwest, and the beginning of a study of prehistoric remains in Maine. While on a research trip in Maine, Cushing choked to death on a fishbone on April 10, 1900.

Even when considered apart from his tragically shortened professional life, Cushing's intellectual achievements are remarkable. He was one of the first professional anthropologists to live with the people he was studying. His remarkably close relations with the Zuni and the tone in which he wrote of them indicate that he did not adopt the typical stance of detached and superior observer. Moreover, Cushing's analysis of Zuni life took him several steps along the path of cultural relativism which was later to become critical to the development of anthropology as a discipline. Rather than seeing "culture" as a monolithic entity which Europeans and Americans had and Indian peoples did not, Cushing began to speak of "cultures" in the plural. He was far ahead of his time in his groping toward the idea that all peoples drew upon their own pasts, stories, and religions to understand the world around them.