



PARKER EMHOOLAH | Parker Emhoolah served thirty years in the Marine Corps, a career that included tours in Korea and Vietnam. A descendant of many Kiowa and Arapaho chiefs, he is a member of the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society and the Kiowa Gourd Clan.

BY **DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS** AND **BLAS PRECIADO**

Who We Are

A YEARS-LONG PROJECT TO PHOTOGRAPH KIOWA ELDERS REVEALS SURPRISING LIFE STORIES, HISTORIC DETAILS LONG FORGOTTEN, AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF A CULTURE LIVING AND THRIVING IN WESTERN OKLAHOMA.

THE IMAGES AREN'T merely photographs—they are portraits of time. It runs through the lives of these subjects, some of whom have lived nearly a century. Their eyes seem to mirror the things they've witnessed and the stories they inherited from their elders, beginning with the original inhabitants of the North American continent.

The idea of a statewide project focusing on Oklahoma's Native American elders began as a collaboration between photographer David Fitzgerald and Shoshanna Wasserman in 2002. The project's mission was to photograph tribal elders while offering portrait photography training to interested volunteers, but it was discontinued a year later. Blas Preciado, now a Kiowa elder living in Anadarko, was one of the photographers recruited. When I met him while photographing the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society ceremony south of Anadarko in 2015, he mentioned it. After that initial encounter, we decided to revive the Kiowa portion.

"The idea is to preserve for future generations the likeness of our people," says Preciado, the project's main organizer.

Indeed, the Kiowa of today are different from those of the distant past—culturally as well as genetically. Inter-marriage with non-Kiowas is common, meaning with every passing year, there are fewer children of full Kiowa descent. So like many cultures around the world, the tribe is working ceaselessly to preserve its traditions and identity in an ever-more-globalized society.

The portraits speak not only of the past but the future. In each is a personal story as well as an heirloom of Kiowa history. The images were collected over dozens of sessions in makeshift studios set up at churches, meeting halls, homes, and museums around southwest Oklahoma. During the interviews we conducted before each portrait session, the elders' pasts and the history of Oklahoma opened up. Many had lived their entire lives in the small towns and tribal communities of southwest Oklahoma. Others had traveled and lived around the country or the world before returning to those communities. Some spoke of wagon travel; others of boarding schools. Some told of tours of duty in foreign countries or recounted the mistakes they had made and the wisdom that had resulted. Now, these elders hope to pass that wisdom to younger generations of Kiowas. ■



NANCY AHBOAH LONELODGE | “I’m a humble person, a God-fearing woman, trying to get along in this good world God gave us,” says Anadarko resident Nancy Ahboah Lonelodge, a great-grandmother who says she loves to pray inside a tipi.



GENE TSATOKE | Gene Tsatoke of Norman is a Vietnam veteran. His Kiowa name, Pau Sote Thai, means “White Thunder.” He is one of four traditional headmen of the Kiowa Gourd Clan and a senior advisor in the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society. He participates in war dance competitions across the country.



DOROTHY WHITEHORSE DELAUNE |

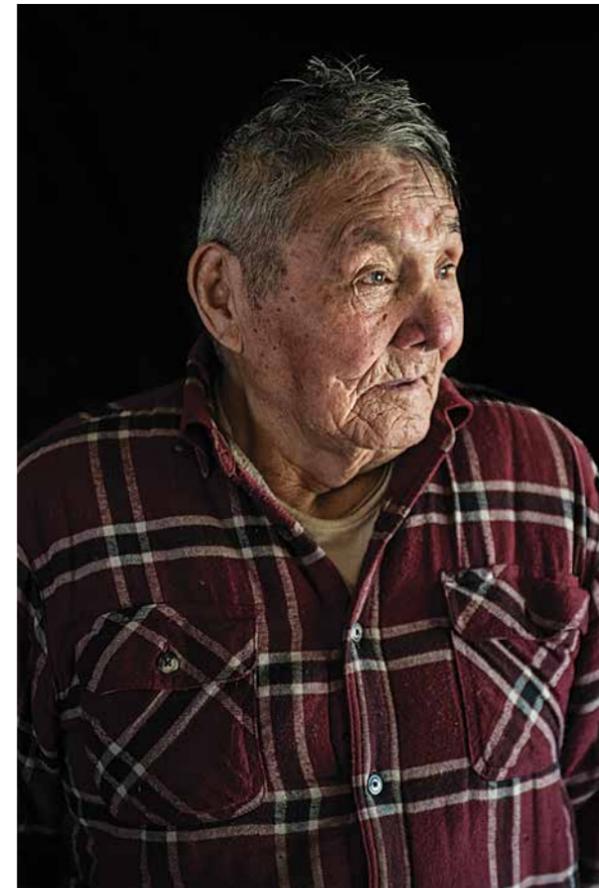
Dorothy Whitehorse Delaune was born in a tipi and learned to speak Kiowa before she learned English. She remembers fondly the Kiowa ways her tribe practiced before government boarding schools. “It was so carefree—nobody thought anything about talking our language,” she says. “It was just natural. Going to church or putting on a buckskin dress and dancing: It was all just a part of our life.”



HELEN ROWENA ECKIWAUDAH | Helen Rowena Eckiwadah of Carnegie also spoke Kiowa in her home and learned to speak English only in school. She says she still prays in Kiowa and is passing the practice down to her grandchildren through the Kiowa Language Preservation Project. Her Kiowa name means “War Bonnet Woman.”



VELMA DOMEBO EISENBERGER | Velma Domebo Eisenberger was born and raised in Stecker and is a former Kiowa princess and Gold Star wife. Now retired, she had a long career as a teacher and education specialist. “I try to be generous and kind like my grandmother,” she says.



LANSING LUDWIG AKONETO AND LONNIE EMHOLAH | Left, Lansing Ludwig Akoneto has lived and worked in Fort Cobb for all of his eighty-seven years and is a U.S. Army veteran who served in Korea. Right, Lonnie Emhoolah is involved with the Kiowa Native American Church, the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society, and the Kiowa Gourd Clan. His Kiowa name means “Man Coming to Pray,” and he says it has a prophetic note. “I suppose the elders knew what they were doing when they were giving out names,” he says. “Because wherever I go, big crowds, small crowds, wherever, someone always asks me to come up and say something.”



ERNEST H. TOPPAH | “For sixty years, I’ve been going around singing,” says Ernest H. Toppah of Carnegie. “As one of our tribal singers, I go all over the United States singing.” The calling is built into his identity: Toppah’s Kiowa name is Daw Toe Ya, which means “Going Around Singing.”



VANESSA JENNINGS | Vanessa Jennings lives west of Anadarko and is the oldest granddaughter of Kiowa Six painter Stephen Mopope. A renowned maker of cradleboards, she was raised by her grandparents and cherishes the childhood memory of watching her grandmother do beadwork.