



PAPER TRAIL

Native American **LEDGER** art chronicles the memories and experiences of Indigenous **PEOPLE** not only in its subject matter but in the medium itself.

BY MEGAN ROSSMAN

THE CENTURY ATLAS. OKLAHOMA AND INDIAN TERRITORY.

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THE MATTHEWS-NORTHUP CO., BUFFALO, N. Y.

Choctaw artist Dylan Cavin says his works on paper, like *Indian Territory Bison*, here, are inspired by traditional ledger art.

Size of type indicates relative importance of places.

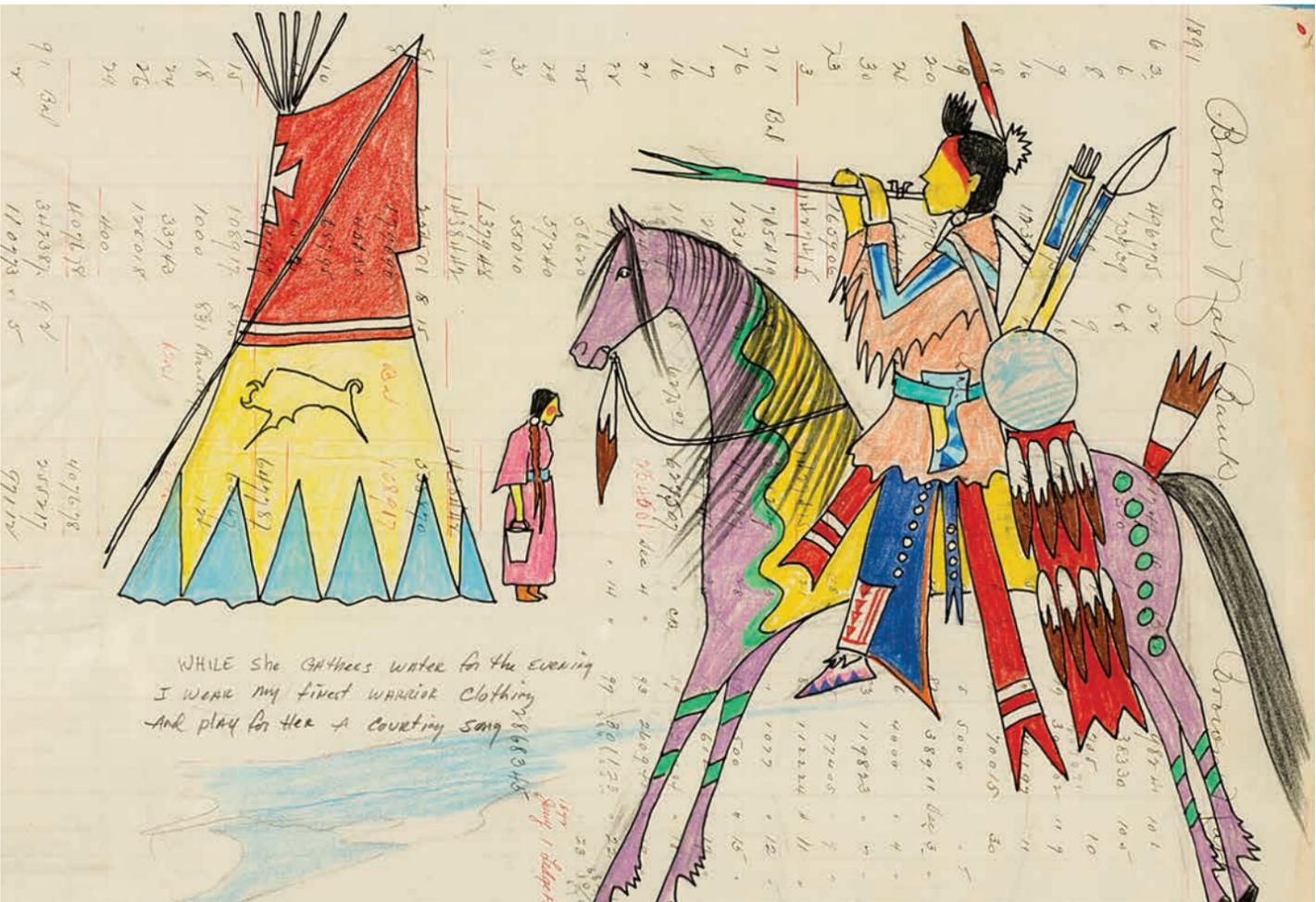
Territorial Capitals thus: Ⓢ County Seats thus: Ⓞ

Contour Lines show Elevations in Feet above Sea Level.

Numbers of Townships thus: 3. Numbers of Ranges thus: 3.

Scale, 26 English Statute Miles to One Inch.

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Kilometers.



The original creators of **LEDGER DRAWINGS** and paintings may have been artists by circumstance, but their work had a bigger impact than any of them intended, **INFLUENCING** artists for generations to come.



An unknown artist created this drawing in a ledger book at Fort Reno around 1887. It is part of the archives of the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa.



BEFORE LEDGER ART ever appeared in museum galleries and the homes of wealthy collectors, its predecessors served as a record. First on rock formations, then on hides and tipi covers, and finally on muslin, paper, and other media, it chronicled events and memories significant to its makers. Native American tribes, for example, used hide paintings to keep winter counts, which served as calendars, each year marked by a different symbol.

“It’s an artistic evolution,” says Eric Singleton, curator of ethnology at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, which houses the nation’s third-largest collection of ledger art.

Top left, George Flett created *Courting Song*, which is on display through December 30 at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art’s current exhibit *Seeds of Being*. Bottom left, some pieces by Fort Marion prisoner Etahdleuh Doanmoe at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City are notable for the unique way the artist drew his figures’ eyes.

The museum’s collection includes some of the most well-known examples of the form, much of which came out of Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, in the 1870s. Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt encouraged Native American prisoners of war brought to the fort to detail their memories and experiences in ledger books as part of an assimilation program he introduced. The prisoners’ artistic expressions created a new income stream for the facility, as eager collectors jumped at the chance to purchase books of authentic Native American drawings.

“The work created by the Fort Marion artists was the first commercial art by Indians, as it was a monetary gain for someone,” says Sharron Ahtone Harjo, a contemporary Kiowa artist and retired art teacher who lives in Oklahoma City. Her great-great grandfather Beah Ko, a Mexican captive and translator for the Kiowa, was among the Fort Marion prisoners.

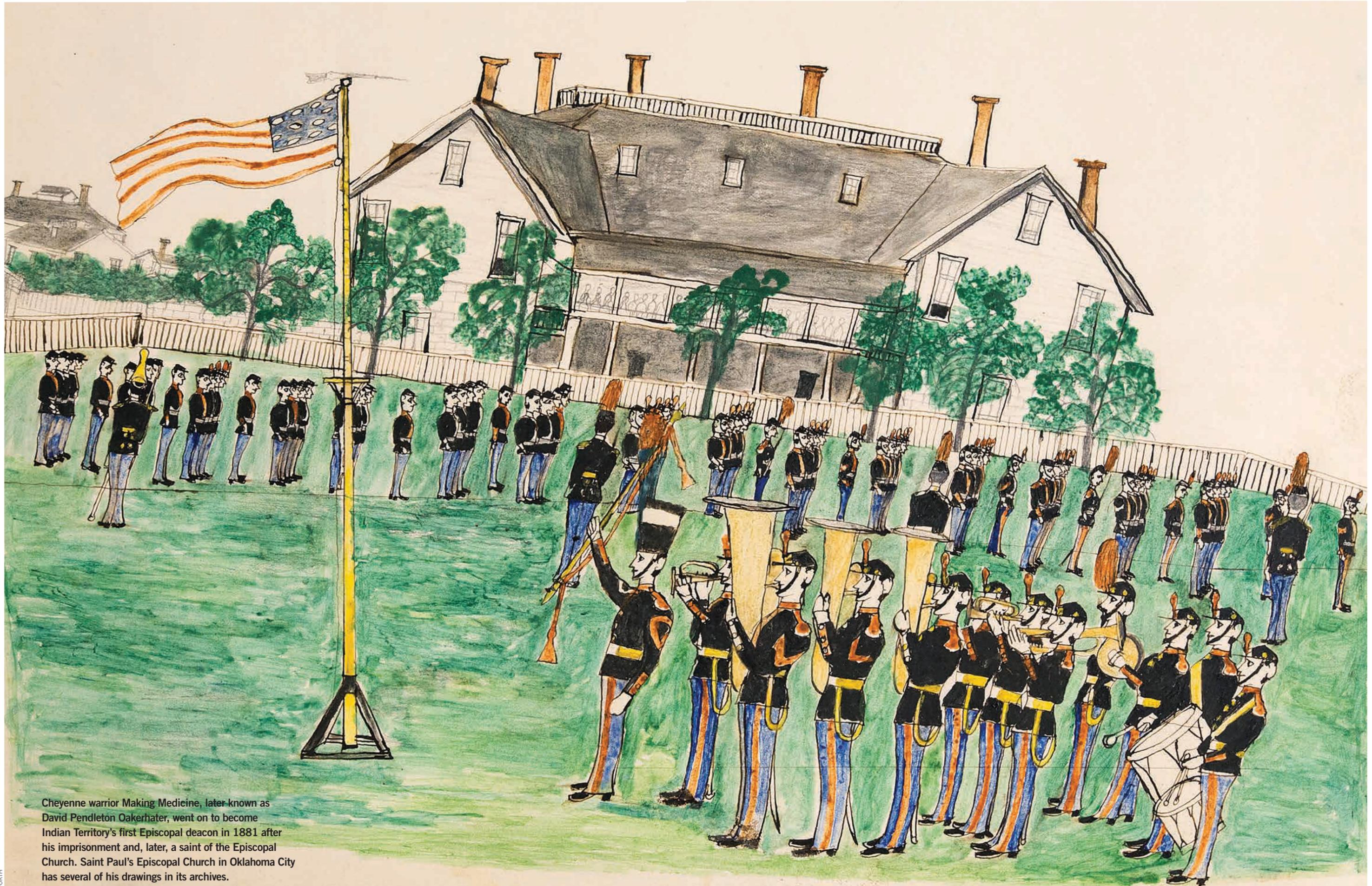
Because most inmates there were southern Plains warriors, battle scenes dominate their pages, though courtship and hunting are other frequent themes. Generally drawn



WAKEAH JHANE

1893 Tax Record of Delinquent Tax Sales, Canadian County, Oklahoma.

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Cheyenne warrior Making Medicine, later known as David Pendleton Oakerhater, went on to become Indian Territory's first Episcopal deacon in 1881 after his imprisonment and, later, a saint of the Episcopal Church. Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Oklahoma City has several of his drawings in its archives.

PROTEST.

COPY OF BILL OR NOTE

Weatherford State Bank
 At ten days sight, payable to order of
 Reeks Creek
 Fifty and no/100
 Value received and charged to account of
 To People Bank of Kingfisher

No. Due Kingfisher
 Indorsements thereon: Reeks Creek
 Weatherford State Bank

United States of America,

Territory of Oklahoma, Kingfisher County

That on the 9th day of November 1898
 Natl. Bank of Commerce
 I, the undersigned, a Notary Public, duly commissioned and sworn to, do hereby certify that the within and foregoing is a true and complete copy of the original of the above described instrument, as the same is on file in my office at the place of payment at Kingfisher, Oklahoma, and demanded payment thereon.

Whereupon, I, the said Notary, do hereby solemnly protest, as well against the liability of the maker as against all others whom it may or may not concern, that the within and foregoing instrument is a true and correct copy of the original of the same, as the same is on file in my office, and to be hereafter met and satisfied in full.

And on the same day, I served due notice of such notice in the post office at Kingfisher, Oklahoma, in a sealed envelope, postage prepaid, and with notice addressed to Reeks Creek, Weatherford State Bank, Natl. Bank of Commerce, and to the several parties named in the within and foregoing instrument, as follows:

Each of said places being the reputed residence of the party to whom notice was directed, and the post-office nearest thereto.

In Testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal at Kingfisher, Oklahoma, this 9th day of November 1898.

Customs Draft

DR. Stamp



Cheyenne Mothers by Wakeah Jhane

ment camps focus mostly on men, women are the subjects in most of Ahtone Harjo's work.

"The strength of Indian women is something I've always been interested in—in how they sustained our tribes," she says. "They're our movers and our shakers, I guess."

Although Ahtone Harjo's workflow has slowed in recent years, new artists continue to come forward. Dolores Purdy, Wakeah Jhane, and Dylan Cavin are among those with Oklahoma ties creating current pieces inspired by ledger art.

Cavin, a Choctaw who grew up in Chickasha and now lives in Norman, started making it about six years ago alongside his other work. He collects coroner's sheets,

Weatherford Blanket 1898 is one of many works Dylan Cavin has shown and sold in Santa Fe.

antique papers, and odd ephemera for his pieces. Bison and scissor-tailed flycatchers emerge from maps of Oklahoma or old local bank checks, cloaked figures ghost across Indian Territory subpoenas, while early twentieth-century Chickasaw politician Colbert Ashlatubbi Burris appears on a guardian sale record.

"In college, I liked to repurpose things," Cavin says. "I started seeing a lot of ledger art, and I loved the idea. It was a natural evolution."

As with any evolution, ledger art has grown and developed beyond its original forms, adapting with new generations who carry on the tradition. Pragmatic in its origin, this pictographic language continues to live on through new translations and new stories, paying beautiful homage to its history.

GET THERE

- GILCREASE MUSEUM**
 1400 North Gilcrease Museum Road in Tulsa, (918) 596-2700 or gilcrease.org.
- OKLAHOMA SUPREME COURT JUDICIAL CENTER**
 2100 North Lincoln Boulevard in Oklahoma City, (405) 556-9300.
- NATIONAL COWBOY & WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM**
 1700 Northeast Sixty-third Street in Oklahoma City, (405) 478-2250 or nationalcowboymuseum.org.
- FRED JONES JR. MUSEUM OF ART**
 555 Elm Avenue in Norman, (405) 325-3272 or ou.edu/fjjma.
- ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL**
 127 Northwest 7th Street in Oklahoma City, (405) 235-3436 or stpaulsokc.org.
- OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER**
 800 Nazih Zubdi Drive in Oklahoma City, (405) 522-0765 or okhistory.org.