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Quanah Parker Remembered



BY
ALVENA BIERI

Gathering on the east side of Chief Quanah Parker's big, old, white Southern-style mansion come dozens of his descendants to a huge reunion that honors his exalted place in the history of Oklahoma. The women and girls are costumed in bright shawls and moccasins. The men have covered themselves with eagle feathers from head to toe. Everyone jangles pleasantly as they walk around and slowly seek their places in the dance competition. They do everything in leisurely "Indian time." When the big circle of dancers finally starts to move, they keep rhythm with five men slowly beating a huge, persistent drum. But the dance seems to have no beginning or end. Occasionally the drummers get a little tired, and the beat fades away, only to start up again in a minute or two.

The master of ceremonies is a tall young Indian man with a big braid down his back. He wears a camouflage outfit with a red tam. When this emcee announces the advance of the American flag, the participants enter the little arena area chanting "The Flag Song," but it bears no resemblance to "The Star Spangled Banner" or anything by John Phillips Sousa.

Dominating the scene of all the bright, timeless dancing is Parker's "Comanche White House," the Star House, a little dilapidated now. It was so named because Quanah Parker had fourteen white stars painted on it when he became chief. The stars were supposed to signify that he was just as important a leader as the white officials of the U.S. government.

The myriad Parker descendants, in whose honor the evening powwow is being held, are mostly, but not all, Indian. A few very white-looking people are descendants as well, like the woman in the wheel chair who's guided in as part of the flag procession. Quanah Parker was half white. When she was nine, his mother, Cynthia Ann Parker, was kidnapped by the Comanches, grew up with them, and had three children with Comanche Chief Pera Nocona. Historians write that she came to consider herself a complete Comanche, and when she later had to return to white civilization, she pined away and died.

Quanah Parker, (he used the name "Parker" in honor of his mother) a Quahada Comanche, was not exactly a peaceloving person in his early career. In the 1870s his political aim was to rouse the leaders of other Plains tribes to fight off white domination. But it was hard going. Resist as they might, their cause was lost. To top it off, in 1874 the Plains Indians were beaten badly by a group of white buffalo hunters at a little trading post called Adobe Walls, in the Texas panhandle.

Quanah Parker, realizing that times were changing, began to fraternize successfully with his former enemies. He made friends with cattlemen and Indian agents. In 1890 he became chief of the Comanches. He enjoyed his ranch south of the Wichitas, started investing successfully in railroad stock, and even became a hunting buddy of President Teddy Roosevelt.

But in many ways he was still a Comanche. Legends about the Star House are tied into an Indian custom he did not abandon. He practiced polygamy. The Star House had a bedroom for each of his five wives, with plenty of room for his 23 children. And Quanah Parker had a sense of humor about his extended family. On one of his trips to Washington, someone suggested he ought to give up all his wives but one and live more like a white man. He answered the person, "If I do that, I'll let you tell my wives which one I'm going to keep!"

Today the Star House, Eagle Park where it's located and which contains the ancient remnants of Craterville Amusement Park, and in fact the entire town of Cache, could use a facelift. The whole area, so rich in history and memory, cries out for a philanthropic fortune—a Frank or Waite Phillips—to spend a few million dollars on major restoration.

Quanah Parker died in 1911. But at the reunion powwow his spirit is still felt around the old mansion, in the throb of the ancient dances, and in the hearts of the Indian and white people who gather to celebrate his life and remember a different era. ■