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NOSTALGIA

CAMPING WITH THE KIWAS

by OHB Garrity

NOSTALGIA

According to some historians, the Kiowas were the most warlike and defiant of all Plains Indians at one time. Not so today. That fact became more pronounced during an Independence Day Celebration at Chieftain Park, a tribal campground near Carnegie, Oklahoma.

When my companion and I arrived, only a few camps stood beneath the ancient pecan trees along Jimmy Creek. Used by the Kiowas of old as a campsite and for religious purposes, the place was considered sacred. Guests were immediately aware of it.

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Few people stirred, birds sang, and a sign warned "No Alcohol."

My companion and I chose a shade near the tents of our fullblood friend, Carol Frame, who had invited us, and set our tent facing the east. Tradition dictates the direction.

Earlier arrivals had mowed, pulled down dead limbs, and sprayed for pests, but we watched final preparations for the temporary community.

An Indian man drove in on a ditchdigger and dug holes around the perimeter for latrines. Next came two men in a pickup to plant oil drums in the holes and set up trash cans in convenient spots. Last came men in a truck with portable toilets a Kiowa carpenter from Ft. Worth, who had grown up in Carnegie, had made.

A woman in a nearby camp cooked foil-wrapped food on a small gas stove, and a girl in another camp raked last year's pecans from beneath the family canopy.

A white, middle-aged couple and their grown son from Houston, Texas, arrived in a station wagon with their tepee. As we watched them assemble the canvas cone, we learned they had been adopted as "brothers" by the Kiowas. This honor was primarily because of the son's interest.

He had grown up in Scouting and had become a student of Indian culture, particularly Kiowa.

Other whites came from Texas and some from Alabama. Those from Alabama also had become "brothers" of the Indians. Their tepee was a classic structure with a "fireplace" in the center, an altar at the back, skins, blankets, and all the colorful trappings of a nineteenth-century lodge.

The carpenter from Ft. Worth came to meet us, and we served him coffee. Soon a fullblood Apache, his white wife with a baby on her back, their small son, and his

dog walked up for a visit.

They were beautiful people, dressed in conservative sport clothes; they were obviously well educated. We offered them coffee, but they wanted only water.

I gave each, including the dog, a paper cupful, but the little boy insisted on sharing his water with the dog.

"No, no," I said, "here is the dog's cup."

"It's all right," the father smiled, displaying perfect teeth; "it won't hurt him. He's an Indian boy."

After promising to return the following day, they visited another camp, then drove away in a black panel truck.

We went to the dining tent of an elderly Kiowa couple, affectionately known as "Grandpa and Grandma." Young Indian women and a white woman were stringing beads to wear during the evening pow-wow. Grandma showed us her handicraft — an entire costume for her grandson to wear while gourd dancing.

Intricate bead work enhanced the sash, shirt, moccasins, leggings, and the handle of the feathered fan. Grandma beamed at the compliments on her artistry and agreed that her grandson would look stunning in the costume.

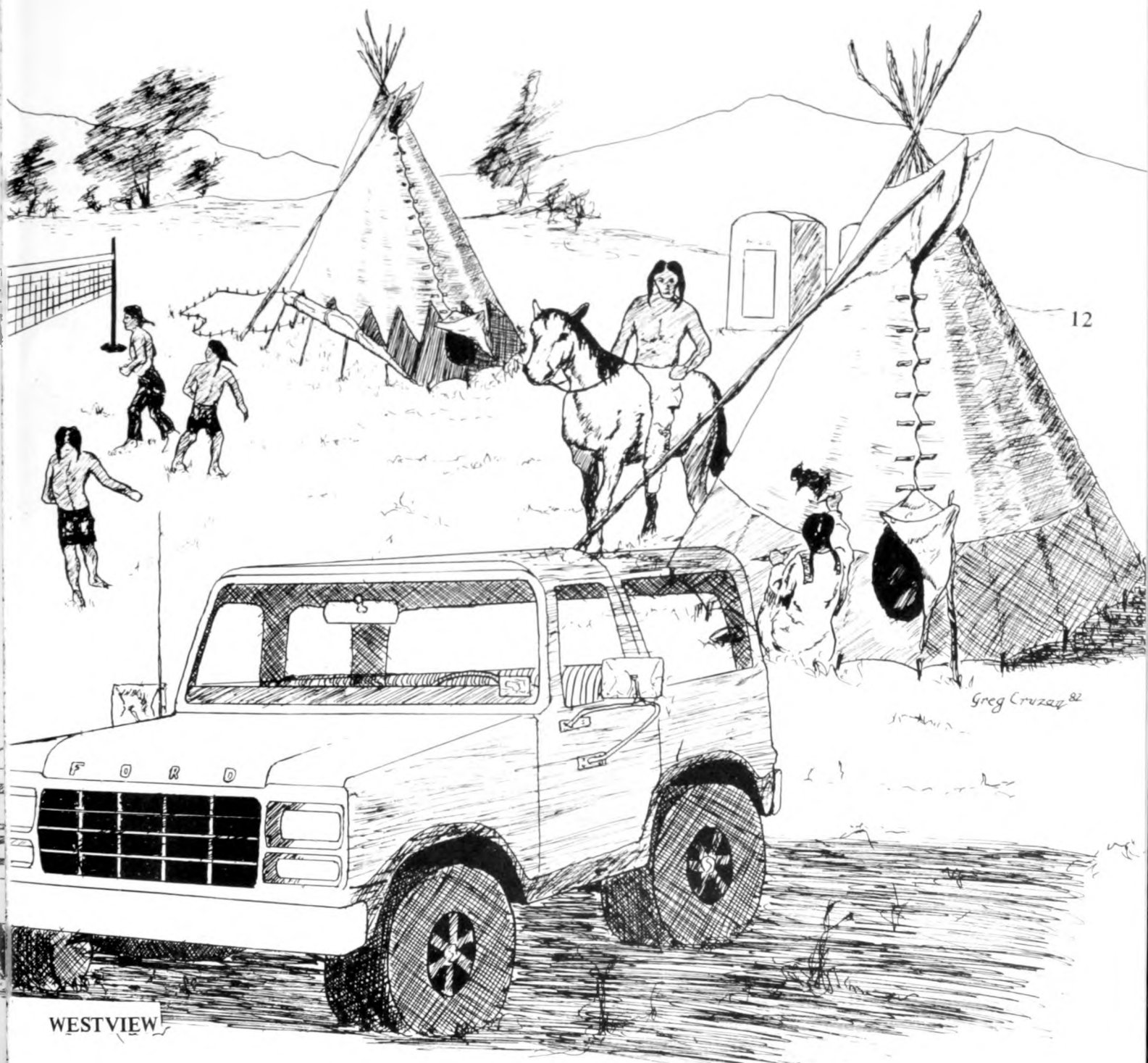
During the rest of the day, many types of vehicles arrived, and as many different types of shelter were erected. Campers moved about in a quiet, orderly manner: cleaning, cooking, visiting. Youngsters played volley ball and gathered around a portable TV on a bench to watch a show.

About dusk, three or four drummers and singers wearing big hats circled the huge drum in the center of the "sacred arena" and tapped a few times, as if testing. A dozen women, carrying shawls over their arms, brought lawn chairs and sat outside the arena.

Electric lights flicked on, and the MC stepped up to the microphone on the stage. After announcements, he introduced a minister who led an impressive prayer, asking God's blessing on the assembly. The crowd gradually increased, with both men and women sitting around the drum.

A muffled drumbeat eventually merged into a haunting rhythm. A gourd dancer in colorful costume stepped out, tapping a metal rattle, as he moved inch by inch toward the drummers. Other gourd dancers, including children, joined him until they formed a ring around the

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drummers.

The beat was subtle. As the rhythm and cadence varied from slow to fast and from muffled to thundering, dancers changed movement and tempo as if mesmerized.

There were the brush dance, the round dance, and others. War dances were held in a second arena – one not sacred. Men only wore feathers in the war dances, bending, swaying, shimmering among resplendent costumes of beaded buckskin, black satins, and fringed shawls.

Participants ranged in age from eighteen months to eighty years. It was, indeed, a family celebration.

Early next morning, a voice on the loud speaker called for “rabbit dancers.” Small children gathered at the arena, danced as rabbits, then hopped in and out policing the campground.

After filling several cans with litter, they received “goodies.” The place became immaculately clean. Those collecting the most litter received prizes.

The initiation of the new Kiowa princess, Kay Frame, early in the evening was the highlight of the celebration. Since the presiding minister was to use the ancient tribal ceremony, Kay was to ride into the arena on a horse.

The family had loaded the animal, a buckskin, with numerous gifts to be presented to spectators following the coronation. That is a custom, practiced by the girl’s parents in appreciation of their daughter’s honor.

When Kay mounted the horse, it threw her. She was uninjured; but a bit shaken, she walked in behind the animal and took her place near the microphone. Still elegant in beaded buckskin, she remained poised. The ceremony was followed by a special song and dance for her.

Using a beaded lance her mother had made for the occasion, the princess and her cousin did a special scalp dance, honoring her father who is part white.

All the while, the horse stood by, bearing the gifts. The Frames distributed them: handmade shawls, blankets, shirts, jewelry. . . Then Carol presented a beaded lance to the tribe.

Kay presided as princess for a year, appearing at powwows and other gatherings in various parts of the country. A different girl is chosen each year.

Yes, the Kiowas shake hands with their past, but they have changed phenomenally in less than a century. Today, they are truly *Gaigwu* (Kiowa), their own word for “principal people.” A minority group, they are a regal people whom everybody should know and appreciate. ■

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The Professional Development Center Network (PDCN) of Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SOSU) in Weatherford provides Staff-Development In-Service programs for 67 school districts in Southwestern and South Central Oklahoma. Serving a total of 2059 educators, the PDCN is directed by Dr. Jim Kitchens, Associate Professor of Education, SOSU, Assistant Director is Dr. Bob Riley, Assistant Professor of Education, SOSU.

Thus far in the 1981-1982 school year, the PDCN has presented 17 regional meetings consisting of 164 seminar sessions. Consultants for the seminars are selected from personnel in higher education, State Department workers, public-school educators, and regional educational service specialists. In its third year of operation, the PDCN is dedicated to providing any services that assist school systems in their efforts to meet compliance with HB 1706. ■