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## Cheyenne Christmas Chuckles

— by Pat Kourt

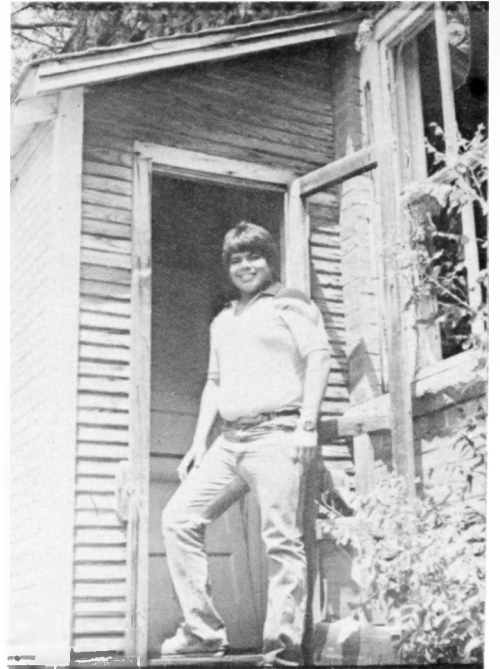


PHOTO BY PAT KOURT

*William Tallbear, Jr., exploring his great-grandmother's first school*



ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE TOAHTY



## Christmas Inspiration

Chronicles of Oklahoma's past have photographically portrayed the plains Indians as sober-faced and grim. Whether the pictures were of sepia tones or black and white, a smile was a rare sight. However, according to descendants of the Cheyennes at the turn of this century, a sense of humor, grins, and chuckles abounded among the Indians.

Mrs. William TallBear, Sr., of Thomas often shares with her children some of the humorous tales of early days when their grandmother, Cora Prairie Chief, was a young lady.

In 1904, three years before Oklahoma's statehood, Cora and the other Cheyennes of western Oklahoma were moved to Colony where the Seger Indian School was established. When not in school learning English, the Cheyennes lived in teepees and tents and enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. These Indian men, women, and children, despite their age differences, all had something in common — occasional misunderstanding of the white man's language and culture.

One such misunderstanding happened one chilly Christmas season when the schoolmaster and his wife spent many hours teaching Cora and her friends the holiday carols and traditions of Christmas. Happily rehearsing and buzzing with excitement, the Cheyennes prepared for the Christmas Eve program.

Halfway through the evening's music, the schoolroom of Indian students was surprised to hear loud knocking at the front door of the building. Suddenly the door flew open and in leaped a red and white-clad man with a long white beard. He repeatedly yelled, "Ho, Ho, Ho!"

However, much to his surprise, every member of the audience, as well as the singers, ran out the door as fast as they could crowd through. Cora later explained that the schoolmaster had taught them all of the Christmas legends except one of the most traditional ones — Santa Claus. The Cheyennes were terrified when they saw the disguised man with a large, bulging bag slung over his shoulder. To them, he was what they called the "boogie man." He had come to "get them!"

Another reminiscence of that first Christmas was the giving of some special gifts which were lovingly made by the schoolmaster's wife. The presents were flannel night gowns for the women and girls and cotton pajamas for the men and boys.

Timid thank you's and appreciative eyes greeted the seamstress as the Indians unwrapped each package. Over the hubbub, the schoolmaster shouted, "Remember to be in church tomorrow morning!"

On the next day, still in a festive mood, the Cheyennes appeared early for church services. The schoolmaster, who also served as preacher, walked onto the platform and was dumbfounded to see all of the Indians seated quietly — dressed in their new pajamas! It seems the schoolmaster's wife had neglected to explain the pajamas were to sleep in, not to wear to church!

Gradually, by educational trial and a few more errors, Cora Prairie Chief and her friends and relatives became better acquainted with the white culture. Most important of all of the lessons they learned, though, was the importance of laughing about their misunderstandings.

Modern Cheyenne families, like the TallBears, enjoy Christmas more by recalling this rich heritage of humor. Let's forget those melancholy Indian portraits in history books and remember people like Cora — warm, loving, and humorous

PHOTO BY PAT KOURT



*An old but majestic Western Oklahoma landmark — the Seger Indian School, Colony*

PHOTO BY PAT KOURT



*A smiling young Cheyenne, William Tallbear, Jr., enjoying the old halls of Ivy — Seger Indian School*