

History of the American Indian Exposition at Anadarko, Oklahoma

By E. Jethro Gaede

Long championed as the first and only all Indian managed and operated cultural arts enterprise of its kind, the notoriety and acclaim that has been generated by this annual event is indeed special. This is reason enough for us to pay homage to its numerous founders, leaders, organizers and participants who, across these many years, have labored hard to ensure the Indian Fair's continuance and importance as part of the younger generation of Native Americans' cultural heritage. Now, we proudly celebrate the Exposition's 79th anniversary, and welcome each and all of our visitors to join with us in acknowledging this special occasion.

Parker McKenzie recalled that he and others, part of a small, like-minded group of local men and women, "had long 'powwowed' about [organizing their own fair] usually on the streets of Anadarko whenever any of them met'. This first informal committee included Lewis Ware, Maurice Bedoka, Elizah Reynolds, Bill Williams, Weryavah, Edgar Halfmoon, Ms. Mahseet, Ms. Grimes, Parker McKenzie, Jasper Saunkeah, Herman Asenap, and others, unnamed, who also lent their support. Working together in 1932 these original founders presented their first event, calling it the Southwestern Indian Fair. Jasper Saunkeah served as its first president. During its first two years of operation the Southwestern Indian Fair was presented in conjunction with the Caddo County Free Fair; however, by 1934 the event we recognize today was produced independently. Lewis Ware was elected as president, Herman Asenap as vice-president and Parker McKenzie as secretary for the 1933 and 1934 fairs. Just before the start of the 1935 event, then President Maurice Bedoka, secretary Parker McKenzie, and assistant secretary Edgar Halfmoon obtained a charter recognizing their organization as the American Indian Exposition. Through the efforts and leadership of many individuals, it has prospered under that name and charter ever since. From these most humble roots it grew to become the premier tourism venue of American Indian traditional art, culture and dance. Scores of visitors from across the nation and abroad have flocked to Anadarko each summer to witness with their own eyes the colorful dance and pageant presentations.

When first chartered, the Exposition included representatives of six western Oklahoma Plains Indian tribes, the Apache, Caddo, Comanche, Delaware, Kiowa and Wichita. This number expanded to eleven in 1949 with the official recognition of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Osage, Otoe and Pawnee. Since then, the Fort Sill Apache, Missouri, Ponca, Sac and Fox and Quapaw tribes have also been accorded honorary status, and are represented by a tribal representative on the Exposition's Board of Directors. Throughout the years, members of many Native American tribes, including the Pueblo, Zuni, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Nez Perce, Sioux and others have presented their unique customs, dances and traditions for visitors attending the Fair. The cultural achievements, diversity, and history of all these First Americans have been the

foundation of the Exposition's centerpiece, its annual pageant productions. From the first pageant, "Indian Life of Early Day", presented in 1934, thematic portrayals of the challenges and triumphs of America's Indian peoples have educated, informed, and entertained countless spectators. The underlying message present in all these annual pageants has consistently centered on honor, tradition, family, community and the preservation of traditional beliefs. Many of you, young and old alike have participated in these programs or know family members who have. Princesses representing their individual tribes have also been honored each year and now, a sorority comprised of past honorees offers guidance and counsel to the young Indian women who today fill this role.

Over the years, the American Indian Exposition has highlighted the creative expressions of its representative tribes' members. In the earliest years there were agricultural and home economics exhibits. Entrants were awarded premiums for their winning entries. For several years these were complimented by arts and crafts contests. Since the late 1930s many of the country's most accomplished Native American artists have exhibited and sold their work to Exposition visitors. After 1956 the agricultural displays were discontinued, but the arts have remained an integral component of the Indian Fair. While contest dancing has, for many decades, been the key attraction, what would the Indian Fair be without its carnival and other activities? Finally, recognition must be given to the hundreds of campers who return year after year to celebrate together all that is uniquely American Indian. Families have camped in the same location, many of them for seventy-eight years. Their camps symbolize what many American Indians cherish most, a time and place where they can share the fellowship of friends and family, tell their stories, celebrate their cultural heritage, and honor those who came before and teach those who are newly arrived. We invite all of our visitors to celebrate with us this 75th anniversary of the American Indian Exposition as we look forward to having many more prosperous years.