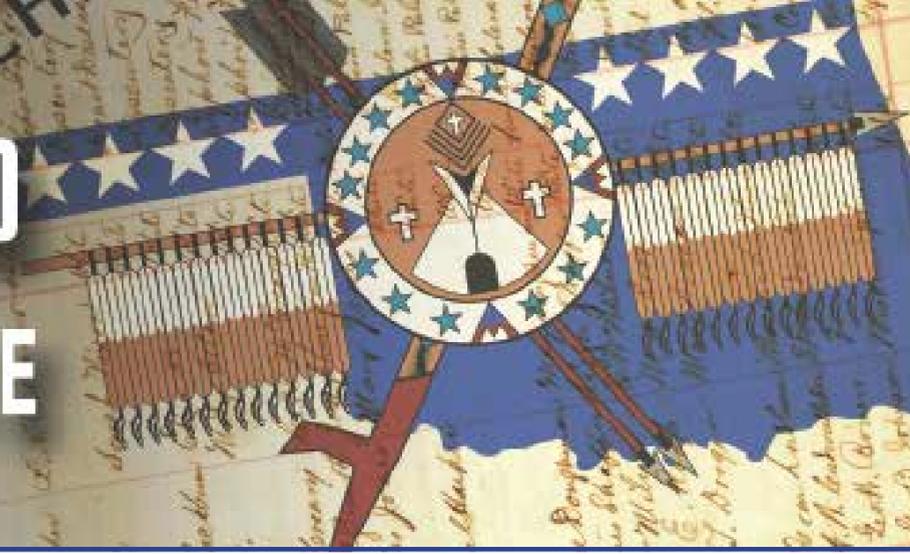


Cheyenne & Arapaho TRIBAL TRIBUNE



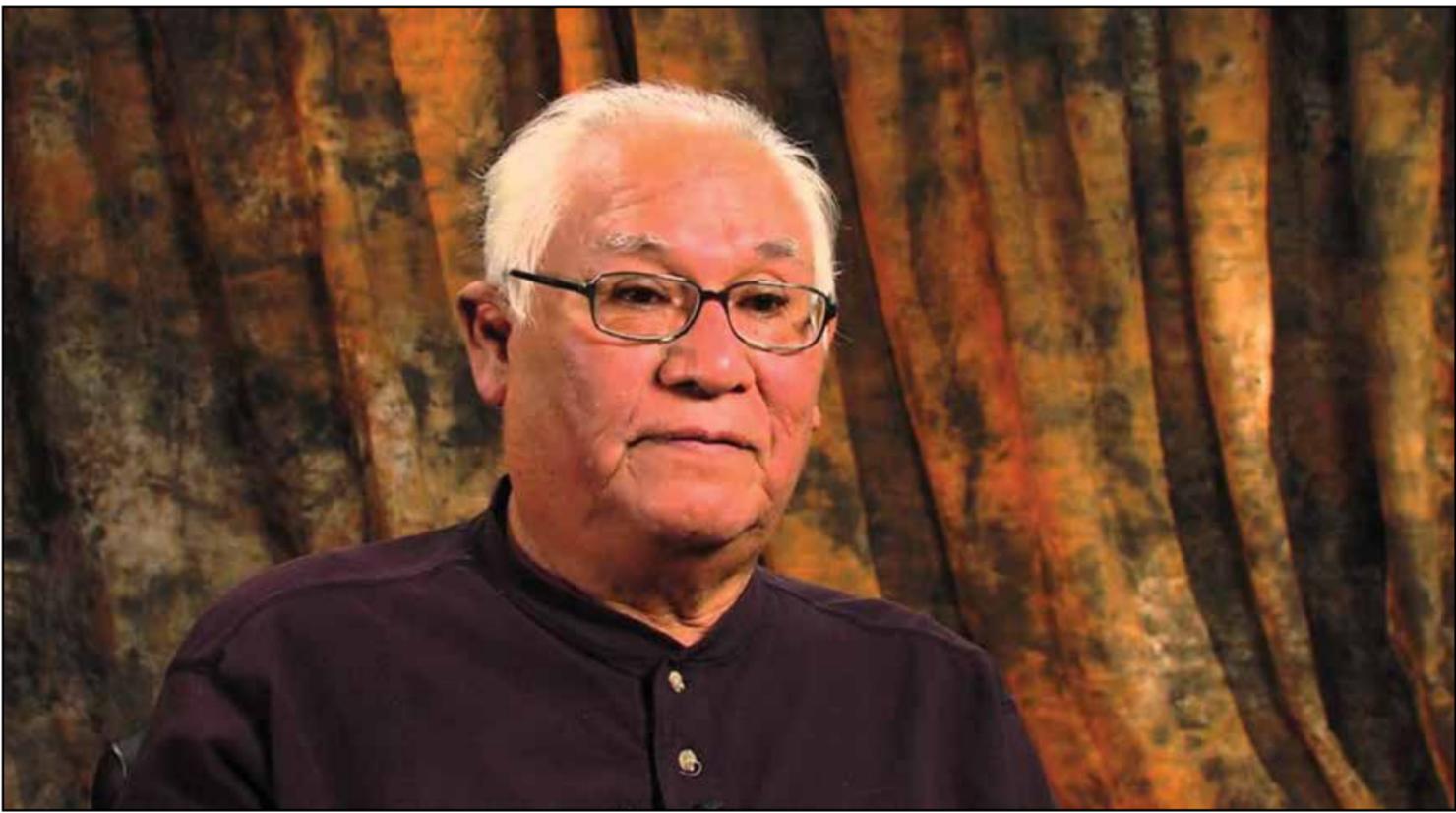
The Life of Tribal Elder Floyd Blackbear

In July 2015, Jan K. Herman, retired historian of Navy Medicine, interviewed Floyd Black Bear, tribal elder of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes at his home in Watonga, Okla. For three days they talked about his life, a narrative Jan said was truly inspiring and fascinating. History is one of victory over prejudice, alcoholism, and drugs. Defying all odds, he became a spokesman

for the powerless and dispossessed and for the cause of justice and civil rights for African-Americans, Latinos, and his own Indian people. To understand his powerful life story, it is important to have a sense of some of the historical factors in which he lived.

This is Floyd's life story as told to Jan Herman in July 2015.

At age 74, (his age in 2015) Floyd Black Bear is still an imposing figure befitting his name. He is a big man, over 6 feet tall with a broad forehead, thinning white hair, and a lifetime of experience and accumulated wisdom in his kindly face. Floyd is soft-spoken, requiring the listener to pay close attention so as not to miss the essence of his words. Although a major stroke in the mid-1990's robbed him of his ability to speak and walk, sheer determination enabled him not only to survive that nearly lethal event but to regain his voice and walk again with the aid of a cane.



Floyd Blackbear in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Television studio October 2013 as he shares some of his life's journeys on camera.

Floyd Black Bear was born in a canvas tent on the Lame Bull tribal allotment northwest of Kingfisher, Okla., on Feb. 8, 1941, delivered by his grandmother during a heavy snowfall. It was customary for Cheyenne families to congregate at Lame Bull in winter to make camp, drawn by plentiful firewood and game such as rabbit, squirrel, turkey, and deer. The meadows were dotted with tepees and tents where the people held social gatherings and played Indian dice and danced. "There was always some kind of activity," Floyd recalls, "even though it was just a community for three or four months. When the weather warmed, the families went back to their homes. That was a way of maintaining our relationships and our community. It was also the Indian way of surviving."

Floyd Black Bear's life is entwined with the story of his people, the Southern branch of the Cheyenne. His father's name was James Black Bear White Eagle. Turtle was his mother Daisy's maiden name. Floyd shared his childhood with seven brothers and seven sisters. He recalls a good life with

hard-working but loving parents intent on passing on to the children their proud Cheyenne heritage. "My parents always stressed honesty, hard work, and family. We grew up in a home environment where we respected one another."

As teenagers, Floyd and his brothers earned money working on neighbor's farms harvesting grain and feeding livestock when they weren't doing chores on their parents' spread. With mixed emotions, he reacted to me both the pain and joy his early education. Attending a white school in Kingfisher was challenging because he only knew the language spoken at home – Cheyenne. "It was difficult to comprehend what the teacher was saying."

In fact, his parents, as with other natives of previous generations, had been sent off to Indian boarding schools where it was forbidden to speak Cheyenne under threat of punishment. Their hair was cut short, uniforms were issued, and the children were forced to abandon their native culture for a white one. In fact, American Indian boarding schools were first established during the

late 19th and early 20th centuries by Christian missionaries to educate Native American children according to European-American standards.

The federal government paid religious societies to provide education to Indian children on reservations. But it was not unusual for such schools to be located far from the tribes' language and cultural influences on the children. The goal was assimilation by draining every vestige of Indian identity and way of life. And the model was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania where one of Floyd's grandfathers was educated. Separated from family and forbidden to speak their Native tongues, children also had their Indian names changed to American names in an attempt to "Christianize and civilize" them. Black Bear's family was a product of this forced adaptation.

"It was a frightful experience when I first went to the white school in Kingfisher because it was new. I was used to being around Indian children and my relatives. There were a lot of children I didn't know and we were the

same age and started in the same grade. I experienced a lot of ridicule and bullying. White kids made fun of me because I wasn't dressed properly. My clothes were torn and my shoes had holes in the soles. I had long hair and the kids would give whoops."

"It made me ashamed to be an Indian because you weren't accepted by society in that community. In school, you were ridiculed and made fun of. I was ashamed and in denial. There was a lot I didn't understand, and the teacher didn't take time to explain to me. She expected me to know these things because the white kids did, but I also found that I could adjust quickly.

"But it was on the playground that I felt comfortable. I would run, swing, play ball. I was free. It was in the classroom where I felt confined and didn't understand what they were saying. I told my mother and she said, 'Well, it's gonna take time. If you understand, ask the teacher, even if you have to do it after everyone leaves.' I had two good teachers who cared enough to listen to me and explain what the lesson was about."

"When I got to fifth

and sixth grade, white kids' parents didn't want them to associate with me because you don't play with Indian people. We didn't understand that. Then there were some bullies who stopped me everyday in the alley on the way home and beat me up. My uncle was a law officer. One day when he came to visit, he noticed that I had a busted lip, a cut above my eye, and scrapes on my arm. "What happened, son?" I didn't want to tell him because my mom told me not to say anything. "I can't tell you." "Why not?" "Because Mom told me not to tell you."

"My uncle insisted on teaching me and my three brothers how to block a swing, how to duck, how to use our hands, and how to hit our attackers in the throat, poke them in the eye, kick them in the groin, and flip them. The next time three bullies were waiting for me, they got the surprise of their life when I stood up to them. I told them I didn't want to fight them and to leave me alone. They laughed. I got them down and they never bullied me again."

Playing football and basketball Floyd out of trouble

and in school. When he played sports and played them well, it made him feel good. Being on a few winning teams, he and the other Indian boys who were student athletes were recognized and soon came to be appreciated.

"Three of us Indians who grew up together graduated together. When we graduated it was a special day for the three families." Choking back tears, he continued. "Whereas other Indian families went down to the agency to get money to buy clothes for their kids, my mother went to a yard sale and bought me a jacket, which didn't fit, and some trousers. They were my clothes for graduation. That didn't matter when we got our diplomas. The three Indian families celebrated by having a dance and inviting all the tribal members to come and honor us three boys. And they honored us and it was special." Floyd was the first in his family to graduate from a white school.

While the giddiness of the celebration was still fresh, friends and family sat around talking about college and how such a concept was beyond

Continued on pg. 2

their reach. Floyd told him cousin, "The only thing we can do is enlist and join the army." They began talking to Indian veterans for advice. The army would indeed train, feed, and pay them but there also a downside. At the same time, one veteran told them, "They will screw you up. And the army certainly screwed us up."

Floyd and his friends learned that these vets had become alcoholics, smokers, and picked up the white man's way. "They will make you feel defeated and mess up your mind trying to make you a soldier. 'So that's where I picked up the alcohol habit. When we got a weekend pass, that's all we did - go to the PX, buy beer, whiskey, and cigarettes and go back to our room. Then drugs came in, marijuana, cocaine. By the time I left the military, it was a way of life. There was no way to celebrate a sober life. When I came back home, I brought that sickness with me. My parents couldn't understand it. Before I left [to enlist], I didn't drink or smoke."

Floyd began army life at Fort Jackson, S.C., where he received basic training and learned to be a soldier. While at this southern military base and subsequently at Fort Bragg, N.C., preparing for overseas duty, he witnessed discrimination against blacks for the first time - and it struck a chord. He himself couldn't go into restaurants or public bus stations. He, like black soldiers, was told to sit in the back. He tried to explain to them that he wasn't black but an American Indian. "That didn't make any difference to them. They told me my skin was dark. I learned for the first time what kind of life my black brothers experienced."

Private Black Bear deployed with his unit to Germany, his assignment "to guard the west side of the Berlin Wall from one end to the other. Our superiors told us: 'If you see something you don't like on the other side - if you see people killed - don't do anything. Just maintain your pose. You're not here to assist people to escape. You're here to ensure there's not a war.'"

"It was hard. I'd see people trying to sneak over at night. That was as thick as this house. I just couldn't understand why we couldn't help these people. We saw them being shot for trying to come over the wall and their bodies

just laying there. Seeing that just made me drink more. And when I got drunk, I wanted to go over there and shoot those guards."

Floyd returned to Fort Jackson at the end of his European tour, and was discharged. "It was on the way home where I really ran into Jim Crow. Buses were segregated—black and white. The bus stations were segregated. I was wearing this uniform and it didn't mean anything to those people. I was dark and couldn't go into those waiting rooms or sit in the front of the bus. I had left a place where I had no control over people being killed, and now I'm back in America and couldn't sit where I wanted on a public bus or in a waiting room, or go into a restaurant.

"So when I got home, I was bitter against white people. I had an attitude and racial problem concerning my relationship with the white community, a community that had caused all the suffering among our people. The white man was the enemy and I hated white people. Alcohol, drugs, and hatred had taken over my life."

In an attempt to turn that life around, Floyd applied to and was accepted to a vocational technical school as part of the National Schools of California in Los Angeles. "I decided to try my best to stay sober and study to be a machinist." Lonely and far from home, he took up with some tribal members who enticed him to hang out at "Third and Main." Indian people from many tribes congregated to celebrate and drink near that intersection. It was LA's Skid Row.

"It became a habitual pattern so I found myself skipping classes. I was warned to straighten up or be disciplined or worse." For a while, Floyd toned down his behavior but the lure of alcohol was just too strong. One day while in Pasadena, he blacked out. And "when I came to, I was in San Francisco. And that scared the hell out of me."

When he returned to Los Angeles, he found a notice taped to his locker at school telling him he was no longer welcome. He appealed to the school administrator, but the man said, "We gave you all kinds of breaks, Black Bear, but apparently you chose not to take it seriously. Whatever is going on in your life, you need to straighten it up." And so they slammed the door on me and that was it. I ended up back

on Third and Main selling my blood, robbing and stealing, and just about anything else you can do."

Floyd Black Bear had reached the end of the line. With nothing left to live for, he decided then and there to end his life. That night, he walked across LA's multi-lane Harbor Freeway but, with cars and truck swerving and honking their horns, he miraculously made it to the other side unscathed. Later that same day, he found a tall building on Wilshire Boulevard, got to the roof, and jumped. After falling three stories, a canvas canopy interrupted his fall, which ended when he careened off a car roof and dropped to the sidewalk, the wind knocked out of him but otherwise unhurt.

That night, Floyd tried a third time to end it all: "I was frustrated so I decided to go to Griffith Park, notorious for crime. I'd piss off one of the thugs who hung out there and certainly someone would knife or shoot me and do me in." After trying to provoke someone to carry out his latest plan, Floyd's attempt at suicide came to naught. "Nothing I said to provoke anyone worked. They just ignored me. So then I thought, maybe this isn't my day to die."

On the way back to Third and Main, he came across a little church and went in. "People inside anointed my head and when they put their hands on me that's when I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. When I entered that little church, my whole world changed and brought me back to Oklahoma."

When Floyd arrived home he shared his revelation with his parents. At the time, his mother was chairman of the board at the Methodist church, the same church where his father served as a custodian. He told his parents he wanted to help out at the church. He'd do any church-related maintenance from mowing grass to repairing gutters and plumbing. His minister showed much interest in Floyd's story. "He said, 'Floyd, God called you and brought you home. We can use you. You don't know how long I've been praying for someone to help me.'"

Floyd soon became involved with the church's youth programs and, as a mentor, became a living example of someone who had turned his life around. Eventually, he began to work with In-



Amache, Floyd Blackbear's great-grandmother.

dian, white, Hispanic, and black youths. "It got in my blood. That's what I want to do for the church and my community."

A local black minister, R.T. Jackson, a man who had been a civil rights activist, took to Floyd and his growing commitment to racial and social justice. One day he said, "Black Bear, God is a potter. He's gonna mold you and put you together as a clay vessel. I see lots of good things that are gonna happen." Reverend Jackson told Floyd about a special gathering in Alabama in support of voting rights.

Soon after that conversation, Floyd received an invitation from a Methodist church in Washington, D.C. The church was seeking 13 American Indians from around the nation to participate in the Selma to Montgomery voting rights march led by Dr. Martin Luther King. "We arrived in Selma and encountered a lot of black brothers. They took us to Brown Chapel AME Church where we met Dr. King, Hosea Williams, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, John Lewis, and Joseph Lowery. They explained that it would be a dangerous march and that we might be physically attacked or shot by snipers. We couldn't depend on the police for our safety. We were advised to hit the ground and not move if we heard popping sounds, the sound of gunfire from snipers.

"Bloody Sunday [March 7, 1965] came and all the local people lined up with those who came from distant places behind them.



Daisy Turtle, Floyd Blackbear's mother born Feb. 12, 1917 and passed away Nov. 20, 1967.

After we crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, that's when the police began using tear gas and clubs and chasing us with horses. Everyone started running. We then went back to the church and they told us we'd give it another try the next day, but we would probably expect the same thing. A lot of young people wanted to take action physically but Dr. King kept stressing that this was a non-violent march."

The second march took place on March 9. State and local police again confronted the marchers at the site of the Bloody Sunday mayhem, but then stepped aside when Dr. King stopped and asked the marchers to kneel and pray. Many were clergy from around the nation who had arrived to support the march. King then led them back to the church, obeying a federal injunction while seeking protection

from a federal court for the march. On March 16, a detailed march plan was submitted to a federal judge, who approved the demonstration and enjoined Governor George Wallace and local law enforcement from harassing or threatening the marchers. The third march began on March 21, protected by U.S. Army troops, federalized members of the Alabama National Guard, FBI agents, and federal marshals.

"Once we crossed the bridge, we were told we had 47 miles to march. The first day we marched 10 miles. Black churches in that community had set up camps for us and had food and water and overnight rest. They cooked breakfast for us and then we marched another 10 miles."

After four days, the marchers arrived in Montgomery, now an

estimated 25,000 strong. Governor George Wallace, who pledged to block their way into the State Capitol building, was forced to step aside when confronted by the huge numbers. "When we went inside the Capitol, you should have heard the noise. People were rejoicing."

From that Selma to Montgomery March experience, Floyd learned about passive resistance, the power of organization and activism, and other ways to deal with those in authority. He brought back that up close and personal knowledge to Oklahoma and, along with his friend, Reverend R.T. Jackson began working on community problems, both on the local and state level. Most of those issues were related to Indian issues within and outside the tribe. He also decided to go back to school, this time at Arizona State University, but now with a much improved attitude and a place to succeed. His goal was to become a teacher.

Floyd completed his education at Arizona State, earning a degree in special education in 1969. He became a special needs education teacher for children in the third through fifth grades from 1974 to 1976 at Kingfisher Public Schools. He was the first Cheyenne to teach in any public school system in western Oklahoma. But still encouraging prejudice and hostile school administrators, he decided to call it quits with education try yet another career—the ministry. After attending Cook Bible College in Arizona, Floyd became minister of the Arkansas United Methodist Church in Arkansas City, Kan. He then served as pastor of Darrah United Methodist Church in Kingfisher, Okla., and Wesley Tah United Methodist Church in Watonga. He served both congregations concurrently, leaving the latter church in 1983.

In all three congregations, Floyd began youth programs, which included sports and summer camps – the very same activities that reinforced his own self-image when he was young. He also promoted Indian cultural values and lifestyle among the youth both in the congregation and the community at large as they related to Indian faith and religious practice.

Floyd Black Bear's acceptance of Christianity in no way was a rejection of his Cheyenne beliefs. But he also recognizes how the white

man's version of Christianity differed from the Indian view of spirituality. "The white missionaries resented our Indian lifestyle and wanted to destroy it because they saw it as a threat to what they wanted to do. That was make us believe in God and Jesus Christ and to worship one day a week. Our people didn't go to worship just one day a week. It was an everyday thing. Each day was a spiritual journey. We recognized the sky. We recognized the sun. We recognized the trees, the birds – everything."

"When I went to school to become a minister, I learned about the Gospels and all those things. But when I came back and had my stroke, I was brought down to the level of Cheyenne Indian ways. And the Indian ways are simple. They involve a commitment and also a belief that the Creator will take care of us. Church is a four-sided building and we all go there and worship. We sing and praise God, take collection, call on each other. It's different. When I look at both Christian faith and the Cheyenne faith, I feel more comfortable with the Cheyenne faith because it's simple. You're not required to go to school to learn the Cheyenne ways. To be Christian you have to go to school and learn theology, learn about the church."

Despite those differences between the Cheyenne and Christian faiths, Floyd Black Bear considers himself a devout Christian, a man who lives his faith every day. "I've always said that church should be a driving force, a vehicle. Praying is good but it's not enough. We have to exercise what we preach." And Floyd practices what he preaches—every day.

Following his years as church minister, Floyd began a new chapter in politics. He served eight years as an elected representative on the Tribal Council. One of his assignments was being on the council's business committee. While sitting on this committee, he went before Congress in Washington, testifying eight times on tribal gaming interests, taxation, religious freedom, child welfare, food and health issues, and requesting more funds for education—boarding schools, colleges, and scholarships for tribal members to go to college. Because the committee is also responsible for monitoring mineral extraction on tribal lands, Floyd learned that many

tribal members were not receiving reports on oil and gas royalties due to them from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The BIA is the federal agency charged with the administration and management of Indian lands. After repeated attempts to get the bureaucracy to respond, Floyd led a demonstration at the BIA office in Concho, near the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal headquarters. When local media aired the demonstrations, the ranks swelled. "The lesson I learned from my civil rights experience is to organize and demonstrate peacefully."

While pastor at Wesley Tah United Methodist Church, Floyd stayed involved with the local community. When he heard reports at city council meetings of suspected police brutality against tribal members and conditions at the city jail, he took up the cause. "In fact, jail reform became my first project when I arrived in Watonga. Indian kids were being locked up and held in very inhumane conditions in the city jail, a small concrete building that was too hot in summer and cold in the winter. It was locked from the outside and most of the time unattended. At the same time, non-Indians were taken to the county jail that was in better condition. The prisoners in the city jail were forced to share a small space and even had to cook and sleep on the concrete floor. And many of the prisoners were vets."

Floyd's activism undoubtedly was a factor in forcing the city to close the jail, even though it took three years for that to happen. Nevertheless, he feels it was a landmark in his involvement with the community. He also recommended to the city council that police officers take human behavior classes and begin hiring minorities.

In 1975, Floyd took up another cause—helping Native Americans who were denied services at the Watonga Municipal Hospital. With a look of indignation, he said, "The hospital had a sign that read, 'No treatment to Native American Indians.' The hospital would refer Indian patients to the Clinton Indian Health Service." The Watonga Municipal Hospital would later have to change its policy.

Floyd Black Bear's focus on tribal government has never waned. One of his proudest moments was participating with other tribal mem-



James White Eagle Black Bear, Floyd Blackbear's father was born Jan. 25, 1913 and passed away on July 17, 2001.

bers in writing a draft of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Nation's constitution.

In addition to acting as both activist and mediator between public officials and the minority community, Black Bear finally threw his hat in the ring and ran for mayor of Watonga in 1987 but lost by a mere 50 votes. Nevertheless, he continued to remain active on other issues, including education, a subject very dear to him. He helped Indian students and school administrators in Watonga, concentrating on truancy and high dropout rates. He helped organize an Indian club, pushed for the hiring of an Indian attendance counselor, supported hot lunch programs, and worked to organize a career development conference.

Suspecting another reason for student's learning problems, Floyd asked a local optometrist and physician to screen students. "It turns out that 31 kids needed glasses and two children needed hearing aids. A benefit dance was held to raise money for the glasses and hearing aids. The results: We saw a real big increase in attendance," Floyd pointed out. He has also pushed for more dental screenings for students. Indian health has always been important to him. He continues to be concerned about a population that has excessively high incidences of obesity, diabetes, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

With his continuing focus on education, Floyd traveled to Arizona, Montana, Nebraska, and South Dakota to

visit tribal colleges. He talked to administrators, faculty, and students and looked at their course offerings and budgets. He then reported back to the Tribal Council on his findings. Eventually, with tribal support, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal College found a home on the campus of Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, Okla., where it is now a flourishing two-year institution of higher education.

Floyd Black Bear has made a career of advocating civil rights not only for Indians but also for blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities, including women. That advocacy also extends to equal rights for gays and lesbians. Some issues, such as gay rights, have directly affected him and his family. "We've got a lot of tribal members who are gay, along with other tribes in Oklahoma," he indicated. "That's a reality and we can't sit back and allow these people to be deprived of their rights."

When his son chose to marry his longtime male companion in 2013, Reverend Floyd Black Bear officiated at the wedding, resulting in some controversy outside as well as inside the tribe. It was the first same-sex marriage performed in the tribe. Although same-sex marriage is banned in Oklahoma, the marriage laws of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Nation do not specify gender and require that only one of the pair be a tribal member. "How could I not officiate at the wedding? He's my son and I love him. I'm not

like a lot of ministers—judgmental. I have an open mind. I believe that God loves us regardless and He's given us His love so we have to share that."

As I prepared to leave his home, Floyd thanked me for being his guest. "My home is blessed by you coming here. When you leave, you'll have an understanding and appreciation for Native American Indians. Maybe you'll understand what we live by and what we go through every day."

And then with an earnest look, he continued, "Our people are suffering out here. A lot of them are hungry. There's unemployment and health problems. Young people are still abusing drugs and alcohol and we have to address these problems. Part of the solution is bringing them back to our Cheyenne ways. It's the way to give them peace."

For Floyd Black Bear and his people, achieving that peace depends upon preserving their Indian culture, spirituality, history, and tradition. Forever proud of those Indian roots, he sums up his philosophy. "My greatest teachers were Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. And then I look at some of our Indian heroes, Chief Joseph, Geronimo, Black Kettle, White Antelope. I'm part of those people. I had ancestors killed at Sand Creek and Washita. Their blood still flows through my veins. I struggle because my forefathers struggled, and I'm going to pass this heritage on to my children."

WHITE EAGLE

BLACK BEAR



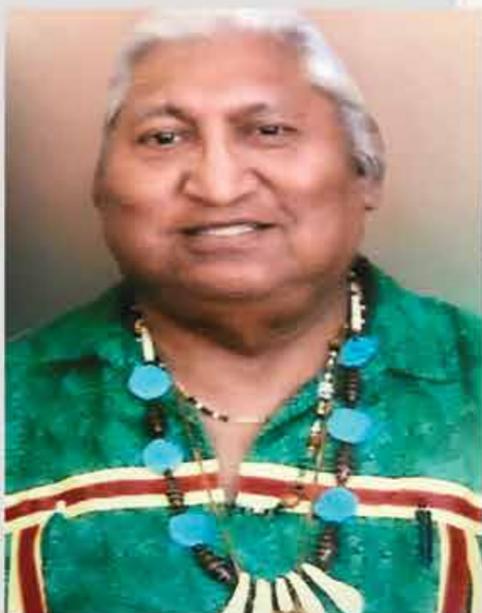
AMACHE



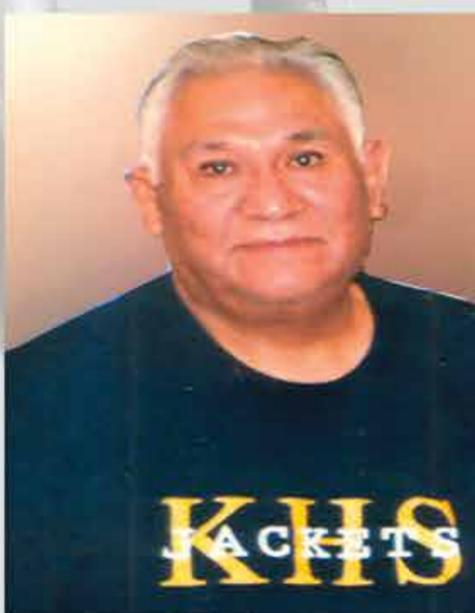
JAMES WHITE EAGLE BLACK BEAR SR.
JAN. 25, 1913 - JULY 17, 2001



DAISY TURTLE
FEB. 12, 1917 - NOV. 20, 1967



JACOB BLACK BEAR
AUG. 8, 1938 - JULY 9, 2016



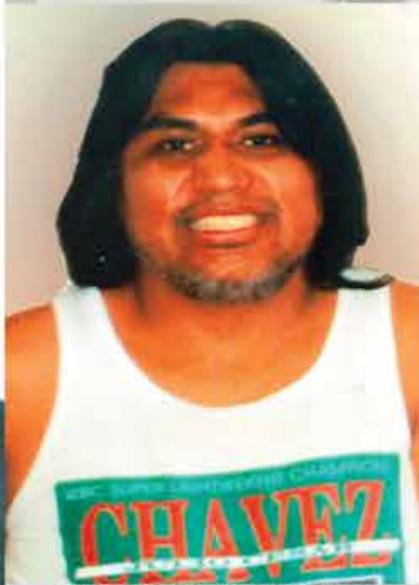
FLOYD BLACK BEAR
FEB. 8, 1941



JAMES BLACK BEAR
FEB. 7, 1943



LUTHER BLACK BEAR
WHITE EAGLE
AUG. 4, 1945 - AUG. 14, 2018



LESTER BLACK BEAR
MAY 28 1956 - JAN. 11, 2012



BURTON BLACK BEAR
MAY 22, 1954



CHARLES BLACK BEAR
JULY 4, 1960 - SEPT. 17, 2017



ERMA BLACK BEAR TASSO
JULY 15, 1934 - DEC. 5, 2007



BESSIE BLACK BEAR TASSO
APRIL 9, 1936 - SEPT. 3, 2010



MARY BLACK BEAR
DEC. 11, 1953