

# 1997 Theme Section

## Oklahoma Women

The frontier has a special place in the hearts of Americans, as an exciting place of change, sometimes a place to start again. Following are stories about a few of the women of Oklahoma who, during the days before statehood and in the early part of this century, broke hard ground for Oklahomans of both genders. They parted with many things they valued: friends, conveniences, security, warmth, children, parents, mementos, and their lives before. Being a woman was very different for pioneers. Women did men's work, either by choice or necessity, finding themselves in wagon ruts, wheat fields, and stock barns, and later, on assembly lines, in board rooms, classrooms and state rooms. And along with the pioneer influence in Oklahoma, tribal influences were and are present.

The concept that woman was made from man is not found in Indian religions. Tribal people accept and adhere to the doctrine that the female was created simultaneously with the male, neither supreme, but with peculiar qualities and sensibilities and dependent upon one another. These Oklahoma women weren't only pioneer women, they were pioneer Americans: Seminole Chief Alice Brown Davis, historian Angie Debo, cowgirl Lucille Mulhall, temperance zealot Carry Nation, storyteller Te Ata, and even outlaw Belle Starr, they trudged, climbed, and finally paved the way for the women—and men—of today. Today's Oklahoma women, Wilma Mankiller, Shannon Lucid, Shannon Miller, Reba McEntire, Carrie Dickerson, Shawntel Smith, to name a famous few, are blazing new political, scientific, and artistic trails, and the world notices, even when Oklahomans may not. Often uninfluenced by fashion or society's rules—written and unwritten—they did, and do, create many of their own rules, built on a long, successful heritage of doing so.

Differences between men and women have been discussed and debated, too often at the expense of discussing the similarities. During the 19th century, society described women as "agents of civilization" and "keepers of morals." These expectations haven't changed dramatically, and perhaps that is good. Today, in academic and business environments, the relationships between men and women are referred to as "gender communication," or worse, the "gender gap." Serious attempts are being made to revise our language to be gender-neutral. Of course, none of this changes the differences or similarities between genders, only the way they are discussed. Men and women are different, and no number of he-slash-shes will change that fact. Discussing the differences and understanding them, it seems, is most important; trying to deny them, illogical and impossible.

And so, at some risk to today's wave of interest in political correctness, this edition of the *Oklahoma Almanac* features the women of Oklahoma and their contributions to building the state and nation. From long before Suffrage to well after the space shuttle is parked, contributions of Oklahoma women have been and will be sometimes different and sometimes the same as those of men. But their stories, the women's stories, have been less frequently told.

From Freud to Friedan, and before and beyond, society has different expectations of women and men. But for all the analysis during the past forty years, it is only the expectations that have changed, and those almost indiscernibly so. From the submissive to the passive to the militant eras in women's—human—history, the fundamental and mysterious differences remain. Still, we are more alike than different, regardless of our expectations. Women featured in this book met, and often exceeded the expectations they must have felt from outside and from within. They struggled beside men, behind men, in spite of men, and, sometimes, because of men. And they—we—still do.

The information for this feature section was compiled from the work of historian Glenda Carlike and her books about Oklahoma women: *Buckskin, Calico, and Lace* (Southern Hills Publishing Company, 1990); and *Petticoats, Politics, and Pirouettes: Oklahoma Women 1900-1950* (Southern Hills Publishing Company, 1995).

Ann Hamilton, Editor  
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## Oklahoma Almanac

### **ALICE BROWN DAVIS -- (1852-1935) -- CHIEF OF THE SEMINOLES**

Alice Brown grew up near Park Hill, in the Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory. Alice's father, John F. Brown, was a doctor of Scottish descent, educated at the University of Edinburgh. He had been the government physician for the Seminoles in Florida and accompanied them on their removal to Indian Territory. Along the way, Dr. Brown had fallen in love with Lucy Redbird, who became his wife and Alice's mother. Dr. Brown died when Alice was 15, and her brother, John Brown Jr., took charge of the family and moved them to Seminole County. He became involved with the affairs of the Seminole Nation, and eventually became the principal chief, a position he held for more than thirty years. Alice married George Davis, who worked for the F.B. Severs Store in Okmulgee, in 1874. They lived for a time in Okmulgee, but moved back to establish a trading post, Arbeka, in the north part of the Seminole Nation. Alice and George had 11 children; the youngest was three years old when George died. After his death, Alice



continued to run the trading post -- which was also the post office -- and raise her four sons and seven daughters.

Alice Brown Davis also became involved in the affairs of the Seminole Nation. In 1903, Alice spent three months at Santa Rosalia, Chihuahua, Mexico, dealing with tribal matters. When she returned, she was able to clear the title for the townsite of Okemah, and signed every deed issued for lots sold on the opening day of the Okemah townsite. In 1905, she went to Palm Beach, Florida, to act as interpreter for the U.S. government in the celebrated murder trial of John Ashley. Ashley was accused of the murder of De Soto Tiger, a prominent Seminole. Also in 1905, Alice accompanied a party of delegates from her tribe to Mexico City,

attempting to gain information about a vast tract of land granted the Seminoles by the Mexican government many years earlier. In 1909, Alice was sent as an emissary from the Seminole Nation to the Seminoles still living in the Florida Everglades. She became respected for her knowledge of languages, her intelligence, and her willingness to come to the aid of the tribe. In 1922, oil was discovered near Wewoka, in the Seminole

Nation, making many members of the tribe wealthy. Alice assisted in the chaos that ensued, when lawsuits about land titles and royalties were filed daily.

Alice's brother had resigned as chief of the tribe in 1916, when it was believed that tribal affairs had been concluded. Alice was inaugurated as the first woman chief of the Seminoles August 19, 1922, at Muskogee. She served as chief until her death in 1935. Alice Brown Davis was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1930, and in 1950, the Davis House at the University of Oklahoma was named in her honor. In 1961, she was selected for the American Indian Hall of Fame, and in 1964, a bronze bust of Davis was sculpted by Willard Stone and unveiled at the World's Fair in New York City.

### **ANGIE DEBO -- (1890-1988) -- HISTORIAN**

At age 95, Angie Debo was asked about writers for a 1988 award-winning PBS program about her life. The outspoken Debo replied, "The only people who ever got famous writing about Oklahoma didn't know a thing about what they were writing about. *Cimarron* by Edna Ferber and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck are well known publicly but both are based on entirely false information." She continued, "Integrity is important because a book is just about the most permanent thing there is. I've tried to write the facts about Oklahoma and some of them are good, but I've also written more unpleasant things about Oklahoma than anybody who ever touched a typewriter."

Angie came to Oklahoma Territory by covered wagon in 1899. She was nine years old, and hoped she would see an Indian along the way. The family settled in Marshall, which was to be her home for 89 years. She wanted an education, so she began to teach, saving her salary for tuition. Angie earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Oklahoma and her master's degree in history from the University of Chicago in 1924. She earned the Ph.D. at the University of Oklahoma in 1933. Her dissertation, a history of the Choctaw tribe entitled, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, was published and praised by historians who encouraged her to write more. Angie hoped to teach history in a college, but at the time, the history field was closed to women. Prohibited from teaching at the college level, she began to write, signing a book contract with the University of Oklahoma Press for work in a new field of study -- the history of the American Indian. Debo's most important works revealed some of the worst periods in Oklahoma's history: the liquidations of the Five Civilized Tribes, the division of their lands, and the exploitation that resulted. She exposed the corruption of politicians, courts, newspapers, and even the churches in the ways they treated the tribes. She eventually became afraid because of the information she had written about well-respected people that had been hidden for many years. Angie found the Dawes Commission had lied about the tribes having accepted the allotment orders. The oil



boom of the 1920s lead to more corruption, including the murders of many tribal members and the theft from many others of royalties and headrights. The tribes were robbed of their land systematically, with the assistance of the courts. In less than 20 years, 80 percent of tribal land was in white hands; land worth millions was purchased for pennies an acre.

Debo's most damning work was *And Still The Waters Run*. As she finished each chapter, she read it to her mother. Her mother would shake her head and say, "They'll never publish that book." Her mother was right. The University of Oklahoma Press refused to publish it due to the prominent names it contained. Angie said, "I violated history. I told the truth." The book was published four years later, in 1940, by Princeton University Press. It received wonderful reviews across the country, but in Oklahoma few people knew of its existence. In her career, Debo wrote thirteen books and more than a hundred articles and book reviews. In 1983, she received the University of Oklahoma's Distinguished Service Citation. April, 1985, was declared Angie Debo Month by Gov. George Nigh. In 1988, she was given an award for scholarly distinction from the American Historical Association. Debo turned 98 years old January 30, and died February 21, 1988. She is buried in Marshall.



**ADA LOIS SPUDEL FISHER --  
(1924-1995) --  
INTEGRATION PIONEER**

In Oklahoma in 1945, a white student who attended class with a black student could be fined \$20.00 a day; a teacher who taught a racially mixed class would be fined \$50.00 a day; and a university or college president who permitted mixed enrollment could be fined \$500.00 a day. This was the law when Ada Lois Sipuel made

the courageous decision to pursue her dream: to become a lawyer. She applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma School of Law, the first black person to challenge the segregation law in Oklahoma.

Born in 1924 in Chickasha, Ada Lois grew up in an educated household and graduated with honors from Lincoln High School in Chickasha. She was class valedictorian. She attended Langston University, earning a degree in history and English. During 1945, Ada Lois' senior year of college, a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was held in McAlester. A decision was made to initiate action to end segregation in higher education in Oklahoma. At the meeting was the distinguished New York lawyer, Thurgood Marshall, serving as legal council to