

# PUNCTURE REVISITED/ Cancel Christmas

## Legacy of tribal Oklahoma survival and a Kansas union family life

By Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds

FOLLOWING a most violent act, the 1868 Washita Massacre, at the hands of Colonel Custer and his troops, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation struggled to recover. Tribal leaders were shackled as prisoners of war, while Indigenous citizens suffered grave poverty, fear, and dysfunction. This grand disruption was brought to the tribes in Indian Territory, later to become western Oklahoma.

To move beyond grief and economic deficiency, progress towards empowerment was needed. This moment would take nearly 82 years of resilience to arrive. My parents Charles and Margaret Heap of Birds, young Cheyenne and Arapaho citizens, respectively, took the very brave measure to relocate from their reservation lands to Wichita, Kansas during the 1950's U.S. Cold War years and military build up. They would both eventually become factory workers at Beech Aircraft. Beech, a local Wichita company, was known for specializing in the manufacture of small personal airplanes, missile target craft and, later, the Bell UH-1 Iroquois ("Huey") helicopter, used in Viet Nam combat. Boeing, Lear Jet, and Cessna were also headquartered in Wichita. Tribal members from the 39 Indigenous nations left Oklahoma Indian Territory to labor in these factories. A generation later most would return, after some experiences of cultural failure, to Indian Territory.

This puncture into the mainstream American realm was an utmost challenge and led to residing in a segre-



Left: Cheyenne family, Oklahoma Indian Territory, c. 1900. // Right: The Heap of Birds family pictured starting from front left clockwise: Deezbaa, Charlene, Guy, Edgar, Jean, Margaret, Clinton, Oklahoma, 2019.

gated district of south Wichita called Planeview, a site for many impoverished aircraft workers. The experience was that of unfair assimilation by way of racial bigotry in aircraft manufacturing toil. To leave behind the comfort, aid, and safety of an Indigenous community was a heroic action that penetrated the dominance of the U.S. Republic.

The aircraft workers union's unwavering advocacy served as a blessing within a clash of cultures, economies, new vocations, and mainstream schools for the youth. The so-called "Plant" acted as a sanctuary of sorts for my parents since the union was there to protect and support both workers and families. My mother served as union steward in the Beech Plant. I recall many years of life benefited by lakeside fishing sponsored by factory agreements, amusement park holidays, free school clothing, and shopping trips. All secured by union leadership and representation. After



Left: Margaret Heap of Birds c. 1976 // Center: Beech Aircraft factory in Wichita, Kansas c. 1970 // Right: Charles Heap of Birds driving a forklift c. 1975 // Charles and Margaret were members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Union (IAM). Center below: IAM logo.

a difficult family crisis of our father being laid off, his six children had no Christmas toys to look forward to. On that cold December morning in Wichita, our father told us to check the tiny front porch. We rushed to open the Planeview door and there were gifts for the family from the union.

I see my parents' courageous deeds of leadership as my impetus to extend this puncture via provocative artistic endeavors, while living back on our former reservation lands. These creative methods utilize aggressive public art tactics, acrylic paintings which seek to proclaim earth beauty and positive movement, and drawings and mono prints that



present complex political ideas in defense of Native Nations. From the spirit of the Washita Massacre site, in current-day Roger Mills County, Oklahoma, we carry on to continue the diligence and defiance from our tribal elders to perforate this republic. The U.S. must take notice to understand its place in the violence and provide remedies for those destructive deeds. Our reality insists this Native world should be described and accepted as independently personal, sovereign, shared, and earth-renewal based. We will survive and flourish as artistic expressions lead the engagement. As in labor-union values, we believe and live for the collective spirits of all.

### The Miracle City Blues

PLANEVIEW was the residential area of Wichita built in 1943 for the WWII defense industry that became known as *Air Capital of the World*. The bombers that won the war were made there. The city was not accustomed to labor unions, members of the Democratic Party, or racial and ethnic minorities any more than it was to low-cost housing. Planeview was called the "Miracle City" because it was built so fast.

*The Welfare News* reported that thirty families of American Indians were "one of the most interesting groups" living in Planeview. For African-Americans, however, segregation was more overt. A section of the city was reserved for Blacks, and the "Souvenir Map" dis-



played a photograph of a bingo game at a "colored" recreational center.

To Wichitans in the 1960's the Planeview residents were still a part of a temporary and substandard community. The slum stepchild image, acquired after war housing was no longer "vital for victory," remained. A 1967 city housing report wrote, "The

only all-encompassing characteristic that can be attributed to Planeview is that the inhabitants are apparently doomed to an existence that most of us would not consider subjecting our household pets to."

Source: *Want to Build a Miracle City? War Housing in Wichita* by Julie Courtwright Kansas State Historical Society, Vol. 23, No. 4, Winter, 2000-2001