

For a Love of His People

The Photography of
Horace Poolaw

HORACE POOLAW

"Pictures by an Indian"

NANCY MARIE MITHLO

HORACE POOLAW'S PHOTOGRAPHS POIGNANTLY EXPRESS what it meant to be a global citizen of the twentieth century, living life as an American Indian. Born in 1906, Poolaw witnessed the multiple ways America came to define itself: a nation fighting two world wars, developing massive industrialization, exploding in urban growth, and extending the right to vote to women, African Americans, and American Indians. The twentieth century saw unprecedented technological developments in the speed and efficiency of communication, manufacturing, and transportation with equally unparalleled environmental consequences. The Great Depression, the United Nations, the atomic bomb, and space travel all manifested during Poolaw's lifetime. These changes wrought deep anxieties in the American psyche about racial divides, class aspirations, gender equality, and, ultimately, humanity's role as an agent of survival and destruction.

An awareness of these broader significant shifts in perspective and meaning while one is caught up in the details of day-to-day life is uncommon. Poolaw's gift was his ability to recognize these historic events as they happened. Whether documenting the discovery of an oil field, a hurricane's devastation, veterans returning from war, or everyday events, his images convey a self-awareness, a weight, a certainty. Importantly, he recognized not solely his own experience but the experience of his people, the Kiowas, and the Native nations surrounding Anadarko, Oklahoma. He was a man of his time, aware of his times.

For American Indian people, the developments of the twentieth century had a unique resonance, one formed by the complex histories of encounter, trade, and conflict with foreign colonial nations. At the time Poolaw was born, the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches of the southwestern Great Plains had only recently emerged from active warfare with the United States, which sought to control Native lands and lives. The Medicine Lodge Treaty, signed in 1867, assigned Kiowa and Comanche people to reservations, and Chiricahua Apaches were still prisoners of war at Fort Sill in nearby Lawton, Oklahoma, when Poolaw was a youth. The historic weight of US aggressions against the tightly knit Indian community of Anadarko, Oklahoma, and surrounding areas was surely felt in the early 1920s when Poolaw began to photograph. His images however, are not the somber and pensive portraits that viewers have come to associate with photography of Native Americans.

What we see in Poolaw's photographs is not the harsh aftermath of war but resilient Native people in innocuous settings. In Poolaw's world, Indian people dress well, go to movies, ride in nice cars, and get married in country churches. They visit

80. Wedding of Charlotte Clayton (Caddo) and Rupert Thompson (Kiowa) at J. J. Methvin Memorial United Methodist Church. Reverend Ted Ware (Kiowa), at left, officiating. Anadarko, Oklahoma, ca. 1960. 45EW9



81. Unidentified dancer at the American Indian Exposition. Anadarko, Oklahoma, ca. 1957. 45EXP64

with family and neighbors on front porches, can fruit for country fairs, play baseball, smoke a cigarette with friends after church, graduate from high school with their parents standing proudly nearby, flirt with boys driving fashionable cars, send photographic Christmas greetings of their families, and proudly serve in the military, Boy Scouts, and civic organizations. Photo historian Cheryl Finley describes this quality of photographic aims and outcomes as the “aesthetics of affirmation”—a celebration of one’s own secure place in society; a place of meaning and internal logic and comportment; a cultural world rich with significance, beauty, and resonance.¹

A national belief in the superiority of American technology and progress in comparison to indigenous people and lifeways has historically served to make American Indians into one-dimensional points of contrast. The primitive and the civilized, the traditional and the modern, the authentic and the new—these divisions have been visualized, reenacted, and memorialized in the arts, film, architecture, and advertising as eternal and almost preexisting categories of thought. Poolaw challenged these divides when he took up the camera in 1926. His simple act of artistically documenting the cosmopolitanism of Indians powerfully broke staid notions of Native people as ahistorical objects of comparison. Poolaw’s body of work offers ample evidence that the nations of the southern plains were and are simultaneously tribal and modern, of tradition and of the contemporary. In fact, American Indian life, as documented by Poolaw, demolishes the power of this contrast altogether, making even the words and concepts “traditional” and “modern” meaningless, flimsy, and unreasonably obtuse. A close look at key examples of his portraits and landscapes amply demonstrates how these divides are collapsed.²

The photograph of a yet-unidentified youth starkly conveys the power of Horace Poolaw’s aesthetic (fig. 81). The young man in Plains dance regalia stands alone in the windy dry grass of late summer on the southern plains. He is no doubt participating in the American Indian Exposition, a long-standing annual civic event sponsored by and for the tribes of western Oklahoma during the first week of August. A highlight of the “Expo,” as it is known locally, is the opening parade featuring the tribal nations that surround the town of Anadarko, including the Arapaho, Caddo, Cheyenne, Delaware, Kiowa, Kiowa Apache (now known as the Apache Tribe of Oklahoma), the Fort Sill Apache, Osage, Otoe, Pawnee, Ponca, Wichita, and Comanche—as well as dignitaries such as the thirteen tribal princesses, each a youth representative of their tribe; the Rush Springs Watermelon Queen; and the notorious and somewhat secretive “mud men.” *The dancer Poolaw has photographed is likely scheduled to compete with others in a traditional powwow at the main arena near the fairgrounds.*

The sun is high, as we can see by the shadows cast from the dancer’s roach head-dress falling across his forehead, yet Poolaw uses flash lighting—his signature style for portraying subjects as monumental, even sculptural in scope. The youth clutches his feather fan almost defensively as he warily eyes the viewer on the other side of the lens. He is caught a bit off guard, his expression conveying a quality I know well. My father used to call it “that angry Indian look”; it is a trait he greatly admired in all his children and grandchildren (in our family, it was specifically the “angry Apache” look).³ This to me is a gaze of intelligence. He is saying, “I am observing you before I fully trust you.”



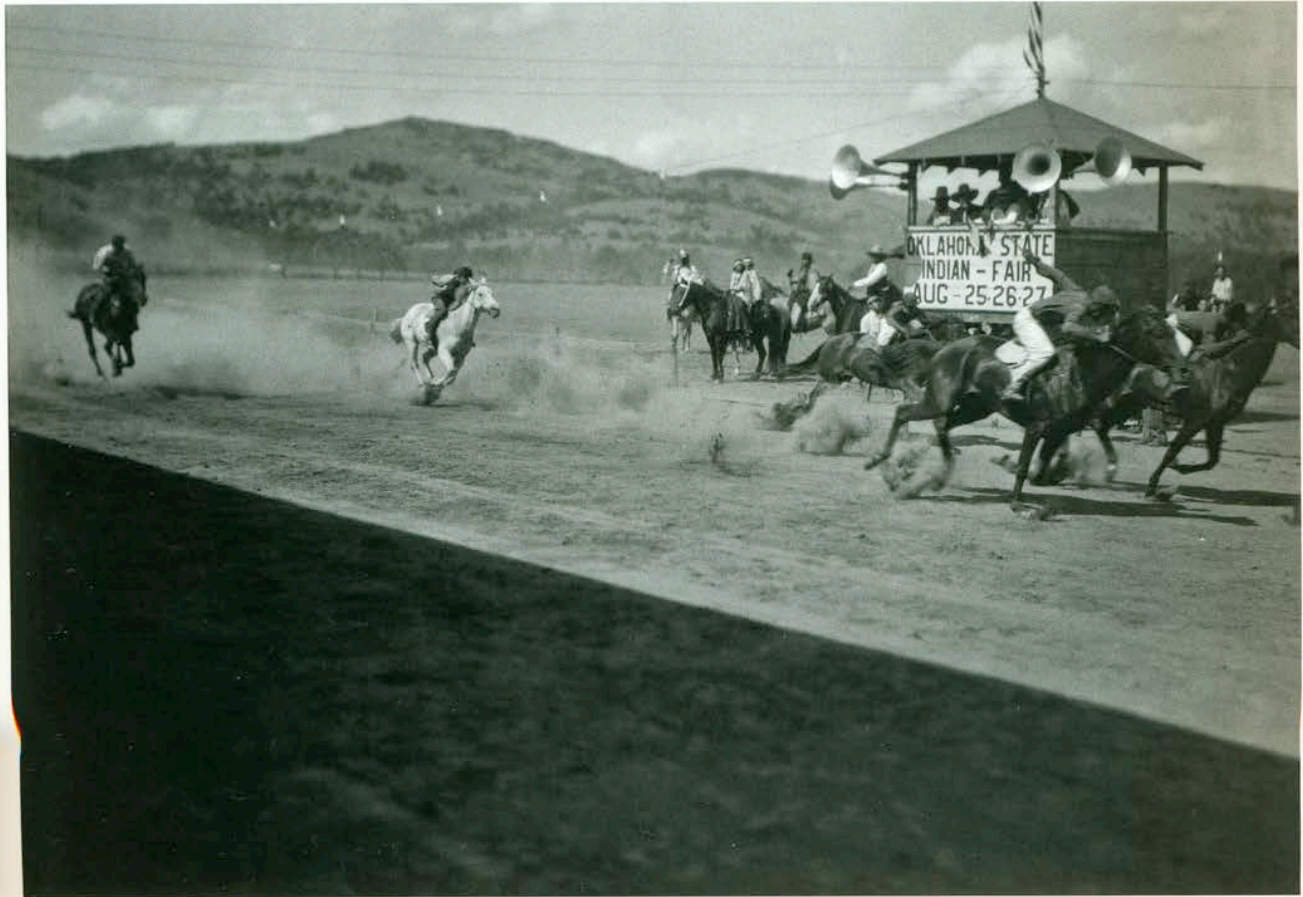
This moment negates the idea of Indians living in another space and another time. Our subject makes direct eye contact, alerting you to the fact that he registers your presence; he is aware that he is being viewed and the gaze is mutual, it is reciprocated. Social scientists Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins call this the “return gaze.” The authors speculate on the significance of direct eye contact as an indication of power, even confrontation, or alternately a sign of openness and accessibility.⁴ In this instance, it is clear that this moment is not candid but one in which the photographer and the youth are mutually framing the outcome of the encounter. We sense a negotiation between equals, a mutual recognition of the other’s humanity. It is the sign that is exchanged on the sidewalk when one is courteous to an elder, the visual fist-bumping of peers engaged in a common struggle, the casual nod of recognition.

Poolaw’s composition here appears straightforward but upon closer examination is actually quite complex. He has created two intersecting diagonals—one of the horizon line pointing slightly downward to the left of the frame (he has adjusted his camera so that the figure is straight and the horizon is slightly off), and the other a diagonal formed by the automobile, the dancer, and what appears to be a piece of trash to the right of the frame. These additional features—the car, the youth, and the trash—could all have been easily eliminated, either during the act of taking the photo (Poolaw might have removed the trash or reframed the image to avoid the car) or afterward in the darkroom (though he rarely cropped his photos). His diagonal lines create a tension, an excitement, yet in the midst of these visual complexities his subject is perfectly grounded and exudes that discernible air of presence that Poolaw is known for capturing. He is in his space and of his time.

Poolaw has situated the young man in relation to the very embodiment of America—the automobile—almost as if the fashionable two-toned car is an accessory to the man’s elaborate feather- and beadwork outfit. These juxtaposed modern trappings are not entirely celebrated, however, as signaled by the electrical poles and trash. The dancer is not “caught in two worlds” or “struggling to enter the mainstream,” nor is he “in transition” from traditional to modern. Rather, he is both traditional and modern; in occupying that space, he defies the terms and their utility. Poolaw’s images give us—both Natives and non-Natives—permission to rise above these stale conversations. This handsome young man encourages us: “Move along now, I’ve got it taken care of here.”

Close attention to Poolaw’s compositions reveals an affinity for modernist aesthetic forms, such as geometric patterning, a flatness of plane, and a sharp focus. These formal attributes, including a preference for abstraction, are consistently present in Poolaw’s work.⁵ The modern is expressed both by obvious physical objects—such as the car or trash, and Poolaw’s framing of his subjects—and by how the photograph presents as an overall canvas of shapes and arrangements.⁶ Poolaw’s modernist approach is not simply an appropriation of Western artistic codes; it also reflects indigenous thought and creativity.⁷ Abstraction—in this case, the simplification of line, form, and meaning—serves Poolaw’s intent to tightly control his composition. The subject, placement, lighting, and framing conspire to tell his story uniquely.

This 1928 scene was taken when Poolaw was only twenty-two (fig. 82). Once again, Poolaw has shifted the camera ever so slightly, toying with the scene’s reality and enhancing our reading of the photograph by bringing the dark foreground more



82. Craterville Park Indian Fair horse races. Near Cache, Oklahoma, ca. 1928. 57CR6

sharply into the frame. The intense triangular shadow emphasizes the speed of the horses while inversely mirroring the peaks of the Wichita Mountains in the background. This modernist design sensibility is echoed by the horizontal electrical wires that frame the scene, the triangular shapes of the grandstand roof, and the punchy graphics of the sign below.

It is a hot, dry day in late August and the taste of the flying dry dirt from the horses' hooves is palpable. The sun is high, and it appears that most of the onlookers have taken refuge in the shadows of the grandstand behind Poolaw or in the announcement booth. The five riders are caught in midflight, but it is the one on the white horse who catches our attention. Unlike the cluster of three riders in the lead, he appears to be without the standard white jodhpurs and riding cap. He is the ordinary guy, maybe even the underdog, in his cowboy hat and dark trousers. We sense he has farther to go than the others, that he is trying harder. The spectators closest to him, those in traditional dress, appear almost as otherworldly witnesses to his struggle. Two women, in full buckskin dresses and wearing the Kiowa headband fashionable at that time, sit gracefully astride parallel horses, looking distractedly at the winners, while a man holding a feather fan and traditional hat stands as if at guard.

As viewers, we are caught in the immediacy of the moment. We are brought into a magical world where racers and spectators seem to float effortlessly across the horses' backs as naturally as one would sit on a chair. The people and their horses

83. Eula Mae Narcomey
Doonkeen (Seminole) in the
American Indian Exposition
parade. Anadarko, Oklahoma,
ca. 1952. 45EXCW6



are one. Poolaw's success is rooted in his ability to lure us into this scene completely; he brings us close to the action so that we care about the individuals we observe. This immediacy is accomplished by both his strong design sensibilities and his understanding of the events unfolding in front of his lens. In the words of Yuchi photographer Richard Ray Whitman, "I'm not a visitor to my experience and I don't see my people as merely subject matter. I didn't arrive on the street and make the images and leave."⁸ This indigenous sensibility runs counter to established photographic mores that historically assume the separateness of subject and viewer.

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term *picture story* to refer to that moment when things fall into place in the viewfinder in such a way as to convey the essence of the scene. "Sometimes there is one unique picture whose composition



84. Swedish Red Cross worker Ingrid Jarnald, used on the cover of *Life* magazine in September, 1950.

possesses such vigor and richness, and whose content so radiates outward from it, that a single picture is a whole story in itself.” Poolaw’s photographic record certainly bears out this philosophy. A review of his catalogue reveals very little framing of multiple shots, but rather one image taken at what Cartier-Bresson calls the “decisive moment.” Unlike Cartier-Bresson, however, who stated, “In whatever picture-story we try to do, we are bound to arrive as intruders,” Poolaw had the advantage of being a cultural insider to the world he captured on film.¹⁰ This unique perspective defines his legacy in such a way that one must approach the material with this framework centrally in mind.

In the 1952 American Indian Exposition parade shot of Seminole princess Eula Mae Narcomey Doonkeen, Poolaw employed a monumentalist aesthetic, framing his subjects against the high plains skies of Oklahoma (fig. 83).¹¹ Doonkeen is positioned in a

grandiose manner, jutting above the landscape in the style of a significant architectural feature or a commemorative monument. Poolaw seems to be saying to the viewer, “See how important this woman is. Witness her beauty.” Yet he has also made specific choices about how we see her. The tribal princess is photographed from behind, emphasizing her profile and sending the eagle feather into the central space of the composition.

Wearing an eagle feather in Native American contexts is not a decorative feature but a significant spiritual practice, as her countenance suggests. The feather carries with it deep cultural and religious significance that demonstrates and enhances Doonkeen’s role in this context of display and ceremonial performance. The young woman has been chosen as a representative of her people. While the conventional usage of the term “princess” indicates crass consumerism in mainstream America, on the plains of southern Oklahoma the role of princess serves as a type of modern coming-of-age ceremony. She is valued not only for her beauty; she embodies the central maternal figure of many of the tribes of western Oklahoma: a matriarch, a Madonna, or even as in the Apache tradition, the “bringer of all life.”¹²

Consider a similar image: this portrait of Ingrid Jarnald, a Swedish Red Cross worker featured on the cover of a 1950 *Life* magazine (fig. 84). Composed using the same photo conventions as that of Poolaw’s Seminole princess, the image shows the young woman loftily situated above the horizon line outdoors. She, too, bears markers of her role (hat and uniform) and can be read as archetypal, monumental, and revered for her beauty and status. She is turned to a three-quarter profile yet makes direct eye contact with the viewer and displays an open and inviting smile. Western readers might view this countenance as appropriate for her position, a fresh and youthful aid to the greater good.

In contrast, Poolaw’s female icon is reserved, her eyes averted. Unlike her *Life* magazine counterpart, she refuses to make eye contact with the photographer. A

typical Western cultural reading might conclude that eye avoidance signifies subservience or perhaps a subject who avoids direct engagement is weak and would not confront or engage her equals directly.¹³ Avoidance of eye contact can even indicate the subject is sneaky, up to no good, or untrustworthy. Eye avoidance in many American Indian communities, however, is considered appropriate for young Native women, especially in public contexts. Indirectness indicates modesty, respect, and a proper understanding of age and status differentials.¹⁴ To see the image as Poolaw did, the viewer must know something of American Indian transitions from youth to adulthood, must respect the use of the feather in plains cultures, must comprehend a non-patriarchal worldview, and must reject the status of Native women as objects of consumption alone.

We know little about the circumstances of gathering, but it appears to be a political event involving military from nearby Fort Sill (fig. 85). A Kiowa minister, an elderly former white captive named Millie Durgan, and the famous Kiowa leader Hunting Horse all appear in this and associated photographs taken near Carnegie, Oklahoma, in the 1930s. Under Poolaw's editorial hand, we see no evidence of how the crowd has arrived to this location (no cars, buggies, or buses), nor do we see any indication of Western conventions for controlling the movement of people (lines of chairs, security ropes, a platform, or a lineal arrangement from speaker to audience). Instead we see a circular and organic meshing of people within the land, as a part of the land—not monumentally situated above it as in the portrait of the tribal princess, but seemingly growing out of the earth as a field of corn or wheat might. The humans are dwarfed by the immenseness of the southern plains as the low mountain ridge keeps a careful watch in the far distance.

This spectacular shot cannot be said to be strictly a composition of American Indians alone, for the frame is filled with people of various ages, genders, and backgrounds, commingling in an endless variety of poses and attitudes. Yet the image evidences American Indian beliefs about the equal importance of humans and the environment. This is a landscape that owns its inhabitants; in turn, the people are subject to a complex of reciprocal relationships that are not only imagined but also enacted and sustained by ceremony and legal struggles over land ownership and rights.

In another remarkable photograph, Irene Chalepah Poolaw (Kiowa Apache) receives the flag at the funeral of her husband, First Sergeant Pascal Cleatus Poolaw, Sr., (Kiowa) at Fort Sill, Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1967 (fig. 86). Pascal Poolaw is famed as the most decorated American Indian soldier in US history. He was awarded four Silver Stars and three Purple Hearts for bravery in three wars: World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.¹⁵ It is well known how much Horace Poolaw admired him.¹⁶

In this image, people crowd the frame. The mourners in the background appear stunned; women clutch handkerchiefs to their face, and many hide their emotions behind dark sunglasses. Shadows of the onlookers fall across the polished coffin in hazy lines. Pascal's four sons, all active in the military, sit close together; their combat boots and dress shoes reflect Poolaw's flash brightly. A woman in traditional dress, perhaps a relative of the deceased, is present beside the young men; we see the rich fringe of her shawl fall across her knees. Most central perhaps, besides the African American soldier with white gloves at attention directly beside the coffin, is the man adjacent to the sons in a gray suit, out of focus; he is our guide. Poolaw



85. Commemoration of Sain-toh-oodie's (Millie Durgan Goombi) life as a "white captive." Included in crowd are George Hunt (Kiowa), Durgan's son-in-law and deacon of Sad-

dle Mountain Baptist Church (center left) and Tsatoke, or Old Man Hunting Horse (Kiowa, center right). Saddle Mountain, Oklahoma, ca. 1931. 57RCM9 —A. H., C. G.



86. Irene Poolaw receives the flag at husband Pascal Cleatus Poolaw, Sr.'s (Kiowa) funeral. Seated, left to right: Donald Poolaw (Kiowa), Lindy Poolaw (Kiowa), Pascal Poolaw, Jr. (Kiowa), Lester Gene Poolaw (Kiowa), Irene Chalepah Poolaw (Kiowa Apache). Fort Sill, Lawton, Oklahoma, 1967. 45UFN5

has chosen this figure to stand beside us, the viewer, in this crowded arbor just at the moment the white-gloved hands draw back from the mourning widow draped in a black lace scarf. This is the decisive moment.

Compositionally, we see Poolaw's trademark fascination with abstract geometric lines—the diagonal edge of the carpet against the dark earth juts toward the gloved hands offering the flag, while the horizontal lines of the tent poles intersect and point toward our gray-suited guide on the left. As a relative and trusted insider, Poolaw could have selected any number of angles to compose this intimate shot. His choice to include the shoulders and frame of the large figure at left is a means of informing the viewer that they are beside another insider who allows us access to the most immediate and personal part of the funeral service. We are not simply voyeurs; we do not have the luxury of thinking this is an objective documentation. Rather, we are thrust into the tent on this cold day in late fall as an insider. We feel the weight of the moment. We mourn as well.

Poolaw's means of attending to both design sensibilities and interpretative codes is nowhere more evident than in his use of a third-eye perspective.¹⁷ Poolaw escorts the viewer into his world by providing an additional viewpoint within the frame in the form of a guide who stands beside or engages the viewer with direct eye contact.¹⁸ This purposeful compositional technique occurs frequently throughout Poolaw's oeuvre. While the convention may serve to visually balance the composition, I argue that the strategic inclusion of an additional viewpoint within the frame serves a higher-order purpose. Here I draw from the work of film scholar Fatimah Rony who uses the third eye as a means to signal the recognition of multiple viewpoints, especially those of the observer observed.¹⁹ This perspective conceptually brings the viewer of the photograph into an intimate sphere, one where indigenous codes of hospitality and generosity are at play.

The relationship between photographer, subject, and viewer is often a complex and fraught process that defies the simplistic urge to document or capture images, people, and places for posterity. In Horace Poolaw's work, we see the active participation of a cultural insider in crafting a means for us today to understand how life was in this particular time among the people in these specific communities. His generosity of spirit is apparent in the care of and sensitivity to the people he photographed.

Poolaw's photographic archive allows us to witness the vibrancy of a time when American Indians not only survived but also thrived amid unprecedented changes. In these images we see Native people as active participants in the making of American history, not passive victims. America's birth as a global superpower occurred simultaneously with American Indians' emergence in the public sphere as culturally specific peoples with important contributions to make politically, militarily, and artistically. Poolaw's photographs are crucial evidence of American Indian rights and recognition in the twentieth century, but more importantly they are a record of his place, his time. This deep sense of belonging is succinctly captured in the stamp he used to author his photos:

A POOLAW PHOTO
PICTURES BY AN INDIAN
Horace M. Poolaw
Anadarko, Okla.

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