

*A six year program displaying aspects of Indian American life is initiated at this year's Festival; climaxing with a large, nationally representative event for the Bicentennial in 1976. The programs will concentrate annually on a regional, in depth view of Indian cultural materials. Crafts, dance, music and foods plus an exchange of ideas on major aspects of Indian life comprise the programs.*

*This year, Indians of the Southern Plains are featured in a series of presentations directed by Mrs. Clydia Nahwooksy. The following articles provide some background on these programs: Dr. Ewers' article on the groups of the Southern Plains and Mrs. Joanna Scherer's review of Smithsonian research on American Indian traditions.*

*Ralph Rinzler*

## THE SOUTHERN PLAINS INDIANS

*by John C. Ewers*

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More Indian tribes live in Oklahoma than in any other state. Many of them are descendants of tribesmen who lived on lands east of the Mississippi, and who were removed to the old Indian Territory that later became Oklahoma as white settlements expanded westward during the early and middle years

of the nineteenth century. In their new homes, they became neighbors of the Southern Plains tribes who had long lived on the Oklahoma grasslands.

What is now Oklahoma was Indian country when the Spanish explorer Coronado passed through the area in 1541 in his search for the fabulous cities of Quivira. He met Indians who hunted buffalo on foot, and who transported their portable skin-covered tepees and household goods on ingenious A-shaped drags pulled by dogs. By the time the United States acquired Oklahoma as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Indians of the region owned large herds of Spanish horses. They were recognized as some of the best riders in the world, killing buffalo from horseback with bows and arrows or lances, and raiding distant enemy camps. No tribes of the Old West were more daring or aggressive than were the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache of the Oklahoma region.

For decades they prevented the white settlement of the Southern Plains, and raided far into Mexico. Then, in the middle 1870's, their staff of life, the buffalo, was exterminated. The Indians had no choice but to settle on reservations and to depend on the government for the necessities they previously had provided for themselves.

Only in recent years, since World War II, has the last generation of Southern Plains Indians that remembered life in buffalo days disappeared. Their descendants live in wooden houses, go to schools, shop in towns, travel by automobile, and usually dress much like other rural people in Oklahoma. But they have not lost their traditional skills. These are expressed in finely dressed buckskin clothing worn on ceremonial occasions, in picturesque dolls illustrating traditional costumes and accessories, in colorful beadwork, featherwork, and carving, and in other handicrafts.

None of their arts is more popular among the Indians of Oklahoma than are music and the dance. When Indians of all ages gather from far and near for a pow-wow, they indulge in their common love for singing and dancing, and find relief from the tensions of modern life. They compete with one another in the beauty of their costumes and the liveliness of their dancing. While older men sing and drum, the sprightly younger ones, gorgeously befeathered and painted, perform their intricate, fast-stepping dances. When one sees them dancing a war dance one is reminded of some of the paintings of Plains Indians by George Catlin, painted from life nearly 140 years ago. And when one sees the small children giving charming imitations of the young men's actions, one realizes that he is observing an American tradition that is immeasurably old, but still very much alive.