

*Native Americans and OU scientists re-create history
with many voices, many stories.*

HALL OF THE PEOPLE OF OKLAHOMA

BY BRENDA WHEELOCK

The participation of Oklahoma's Native American tribes in every phase of the planning and execution of the McCasland Foundation Hall of the People of Oklahoma turned a scientific project into one that brings to life native cultures past and present. This unique approach to museum development is setting a precedent for the way exhibits on native peoples should be designed. Billie Ruth Hoff (Caddo), at right, revisited the hall in September 2000 for a day of tribal celebrations coordinated by the Native American Advisory Board and the Native American communities. Hoff had represented her tribe in the creation of the Handprint Wall at the entrance to the hall. Throughout the hall, native accounts of history and culture are woven seamlessly into scientific explanations of the extensive archaeological finds that form the exhibits.



Robert Taylor



When the staff of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History set out to depict the 30,000-year history of human life in Oklahoma, they knew they had a monumental task. So they called in the experts. Not only did they bring together the curators, archaeologists, and exhibit planners, but they also invited representatives from all 36 of Oklahoma's Native American tribes to help create a gallery truly deserving of its name, the McCasland Foundation Hall of the People of Oklahoma.

While the gallery was built upon the strengths of the museum's archaeological collections and Native American artifacts, it was brought to life by the voices and stories of those experts who served on the Social Science Advisory Board, says exhibits developer Pamela S. Wallace, a cultural anthropologist and the museum's head of exhibit development and evaluation.

"The board's mission was to create the stories to be told in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma and to critique the design," she says. "And they didn't just come on to rubber-stamp our suggestions. They were active members, intricately involved in the whole process."

The greatest contribution of the Native American advisers, Wallace adds, was "their ability to explain to the museum planners their lifeways—not what we normally perceive through our eyes, but to see it through their eyes."

Glenda Galvan, a representative of the Chickasaw Nation, says the OU museum set a precedent for the way exhibits on native peoples should be designed.

"I don't think you'll find another museum in the world that has done as good a job at involving Native Americans in the planning process," she says. "I really wish more museums were built this way."

Galvan and other board members met monthly in the three years leading up to the museum's May 2000 opening and continue to meet regularly to plan future exhibits. She likens the process to "weaving a tapestry" of many voices, from the museum staff and scientists to the dozens of tribes, each with their own unique history and culture.

Visitors to the Hall of the People of Oklahoma find this tapestry of voices evident from the very entrance to the gallery, where they literally can place their hands inside handprints made by Native Americans representing many of the tribes in Oklahoma today. Then they hear excerpts from origin stories—traditional tales of how life and humankind began—told by five tribal elders in their native languages as well as English. The stories set the mood for a journey back in time and begin to give visitors an appreciation for the diversity of experiences and customs among various tribes. *continued*



Who Were the First “Oklahomans”?

As visitors move into the first exhibit area, the voices shift from native accounts of creation to scientists’ accounts of how humans first came to live in the Americas. Until recently, archaeological evidence of human habitation in North America dated between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago. The Burnham site in western Oklahoma changed all that.

The site was uncovered accidentally in 1986 when landowner Keith Burnham was digging a pond and unearthed some bones from a *Bison alleni* and *Bison antiquus*, a species that became extinct 20,000 years ago. Excavation of the site by Don Wyckoff and his team from the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey yielded the bones of many more Ice Age animals, including mammoth, ground sloth, camel, horse, and alligator. The most astounding discoveries were 50 resharpening flakes, two broken tools, and a flint cobble, all found within six feet of the giant bison.

The flint from which a few of the flakes were thrown originated in central Texas, some 500 miles away, and could have been brought only by humans, the scientists concluded. The bones and man-made objects found at Burnham date back approximately 30,000 years, revolutionizing archaeologists’ understanding of how long ago people first lived in Oklahoma.

“This site shows us that people were here in the Americas much earlier than we ever thought before, and it’s right here in Oklahoma!” Wallace says.

The excitement of the discovery is dramatically brought to life in a diorama of the Burnham site that features many of the artifacts actually found there.

“Not only does the exhibit address the question of when humans first inhabited Oklahoma, but it also explains what archaeologists do and the techniques scientists use to piece together stories uncovered at sites like Burnham,” says Wyckoff, who is now the museum’s associate curator of archaeology.

From the Burnham exhibit, museum visitors travel forward in time to learn about the people of the Clovis culture, who lived in the Southern Plains of North America from 11,500 to 10,800 years ago. These early hunting peoples, named for a 1936 archaeological discovery in Clovis, New Mexico, came to be identified by their distinctive fluted spear points and other tools unique to their culture.

Visitors to the Clovis exhibit witness the precision and skill necessary to hunt Ice Age mammoths 10,000 years ago as a hunter hurls his spear into a giant creature. The hunt scene is depicted using timed lighting on painted cloth scrims, says Wallace.

“By lighting them the correct way, you get a sense of movement,” she says. “You actually hear the spear as it whooshes past you toward the mammoth.”

Accompanying presentations tell how members of the Clovis culture lived and the unique tools they used.

Experience a Folsom Bison Hunt

One of the most dramatic presentations in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma immerses visitors in a thrilling bison hunt, just as it might have been experienced 10,000 years ago by



A hand-painted mural of a river scene serves as the backdrop for this Dalton culture exhibit of a canoe builder that is part of the Hall of the People of Oklahoma. The male figure and that of a woman breaking open nuts for a meal are the only mannequins used in the hall. Unlike the great Folsom hunters of the same time, the Dalton people were gatherers who traveled the rivers of the eastern woodlands and lived off small game, plants and nuts.



members of the Folsom culture. A mini-theater is transformed into a western Oklahoma arroyo, or box canyon, where the presentation opens with a “calling-in” ceremony. In this ritual, a tribal leader places a painted bison skull at the end of the arroyo possibly to help draw in the herd.

Visitors hear the shouts of Folsom hunters and the thundering hooves of stampeding bison being driven into the dead-end arroyo, where they are trapped and become easy prey for the hunters. Once again, painted scrimms and timed lighting illustrate the sequence of events while a native elder tells the story of this ancestral hunt.

As the hunt scene fades, visitors are drawn to the end of the arroyo, where the actual trampled skull of a *Bison antiquus* is illuminated. This 10,500-year-old skull features a zig-zag design of red ochre painted in hematite.

“It’s the oldest known painted object in North America,” says archaeologist Leland Bement, who made the discovery during the excavation of the Cooper site in northwest Oklahoma. Found in 1992, the Cooper site is among the largest Folsom Age bison kill sites in the southern plains and has yielded major contributions to what is known of the Folsom people and their hunting practices.

“The painted skull gives us a new perspective on what Folsom life was like,” Bement says. “It gives us a glimpse into their use of ritual and the supernatural.”

The dramatic bison hunt presentation is complemented by informative maps, kiosks, and displays about the Folsom people and the bison that sustained them.

“I hope this exhibit will help visitors see past the artifacts and recognize that these were living, breathing people with similar concerns of anyone, any time,” Bement says.

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Sounds of a Proud Past

The Cooper/Folsom exhibit in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma is an exciting experience, a bison hunt brought to life through video, lighting—and most of all, sound. But the moving voice of the Native American storyteller who narrates this traditional tale of his people was getting lost in the sounds of pounding hooves and hunters’ cries. Museum technician Mike McCarty assumed the task of remixing the audio portion of the display to bring the voice up over the other elements.

A professional drummer who once had his own recording studio business, in addition to being an accomplished woodworker, McCarty had to completely re-edit the storyteller’s voice from uncut original studio tapes. Working within the time constraints of the video already in place, McCarty edited individual words and sometimes single consonants from the original takes to create a smooth-flowing narrative that transports museum visitors from the halls of SNOMNH to the plains of Native Oklahoma.



LEFT: Focal point of the dramatic Folsom bison hunt presentation is the “Cooper Skull,” at left, the oldest painted object ever found in North America. The skull was discovered in the second kill layer at the Cooper site (a stratified Folsom bison kill site in northwest Oklahoma). Part of the “calling-in” ceremony, the skull, with its zigzag design of red ochre painted in hematite, possibly was used to lure the herd into a box canyon.

Sanford Mauldin

Many of the items you will see displayed are things brought from other parts of the country, like copper from the Great Lakes and conch shells from Florida.

Life Along the River

Living at the same time as the people of Folsom, members of the Dalton culture traveled the many rivers and lived off the resources in the eastern woodlands. Rather than hunting bison, these people relied on small game, plants, and nuts for their food. The Dalton gatherers were named after Judge S. P. Dalton, who discovered the first artifacts of this culture on his land in Jefferson, Missouri.

"The Dalton exhibit is the only place where we use mannequin figures," Wallace says. "The male figure was actually cast from someone we know to make sure it had the body build we wanted. He is shown digging out a wooden canoe. There is also the cast of a woman who is using a stone to break open nuts for a meal."

Also featured are two hand-painted murals—a river scene that serves as a backdrop for the canoe builder and a giant mural of a Dalton campsite that shows what life might have been like traveling up and down the rivers.

The exhibit includes case displays on the Dalton people, where they lived, and their technology. Visitors also learn about the 10,800-year-old artifacts discovered at the Packard Site in northeastern Oklahoma. Scientists believe these artifacts belonged to a group of hunter-gatherers who followed the people of Clovis but predated the Dalton culture.

Forming the centerpiece of the Mississippian Cultural Universe exhibit in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma are two life-size, wattle-and-daub houses and a 22-foot-long dugout canoe built for the museum by engineer Phil Cross, a member of the Caddo tribe. Each house represents one of two distinct groups of Mississippian people, those living along the Arkansas and Red River basins of Oklahoma 1,200 to 500 years ago. Cross used modern tools to replicate the canoe from a single cypress log, while 1,000 years ago his ancestors would have used hot coals to burn out the interior of the log to create their canoes.

The Mississippian Cultural Universe

As visitors move into the central area of the gallery, they enter the Mississippian Cultural Universe and learn how two distinct groups of Mississippian people lived along the Arkansas and Red River basins of Oklahoma from approximately 1,200 to 500 years ago.

"The Mississippian culture reached throughout the Mississippi River system from as far north as Illinois and east to Georgia," says Wallace. "They were traders, so many of the items you will see displayed are things brought from other parts of the country, like copper from the Great Lakes and conch shells from Florida."

Among the highlights of this exhibit are two life-sized wattle-and-daub houses built for the museum by Phil Cross, a mechanical engineer and member of the Caddo tribe. Cross created a four-post house like those found along the Arkansas River Basin and a two-post house similar to those used by the Red River Basin people.

A longtime museum volunteer, Cross was asked to build the houses because of his interest and experience in building the bent-pole, beehive-shaped houses constructed by his Caddoan ancestors. Also, houses similar to those displayed in the museum had been discovered near his former home in Colony, Oklahoma.

"There was a cultural tie for me because these were the kinds of houses that had been found on our property," he says, explaining that Don Wyckoff and others excavated an ancient village there in 1960.

The museum replicas were built over an eight-month period, allowing time to gather and season the natural materials, Cross says. He used a combination of cedar and southern pine for the frames. A portion of each roof was thatched with heavy reeds specially treated for museum display, and the walls were reinforced with simulated clay.

Cross also created a 22-foot-long replica of a canoe used by Mississippian peoples nearly 1,000 years ago. Cross used a chainsaw and hand tools to sculpt the vessel from a single cypress log. While he had the luxury of modern power tools, Cross says Mississippians used hot coals to burn out the interior of their canoes and sharp stone adz for carving.

"Throughout the construction process, I was reminded of how these people would have worked 1,000 years ago," Cross says. "As I'd come across a problem, I'd wonder how they would have dealt with it back then."

Within the context of the Mississippian culture, visitors also learn about the Spiro people of eastern Oklahoma, known for the elaborate burial mounds they built for their tribal leaders. Visitors familiar with the Spiro exhibit in the old museum building see the culture in a whole new light, says Wallace.

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Sanford Mauldin



The "Rattler" pipe, circa 1000 A.D., is part of the museum's extensive Spiro Mounds archaeological collection.



Time-honored Native American games, along with storytellers, dancers, and drummers were part of the grand opening celebration for the McCasland Foundation Hall of the People of Oklahoma in September 2000. Active in exhibit organization from Day 1, the Native American advisers continue to meet regularly to plan future exhibits and programs.

"Spiro is now being displayed within the context of the big story, the Mississippian culture, of which Spiro is a small part," she says. "This exhibit emphasizes much more of the everyday life of the Spiro people rather than just their ceremonial practices."

Removal: The American Holocaust

The heart-wrenching story of the "American Holocaust," the removal of native people from their tribal lands to Indian Territory, is told through a series of maps showing land loss.

"The walls themselves feature line drawings of wonderful faces of native peoples between 1830 and 1870, which was the time of removal to Oklahoma," Wallace says. "They are stunningly beautiful."

Through the use of maps and an interactive timeline, visitors learn important treaty and removal dates and see tribes' paths to Indian Territory. They also witness the loss of communally owned tribal lands to make way for the great land runs and the creation of the state of Oklahoma.

Meet Today's Native Oklahomans

Who are the present-day native peoples of our state? The final segment in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma addresses this question from the perspectives of the people themselves through exhibits that focus on the household and family.

Because of limited time and resources, the Native American advisory board chose to first highlight the state's nine western tribes, says Wallace. "Eventually, every tribe in Oklahoma will be represented here within the exhibits."

Tribal advisers met many times searching for a common theme through which they could tell their story, Wallace says. They came up with the domestic arbor, an open-aired, porch-like shelter where western tribal families would spend much of their time during the hot summer months.

Visitors are invited inside the cool comforts of an actual six-post arbor, where they'll find a table being prepared for dinner, a partially beaded cradleboard, a baby hammock hanging from the arbor beams, a colorful dance bustle, and other household items.

"We wanted to emphasize that arbors have been in continuous use through time, so we added a number of items to show the progression from the 1800s to the 21st century," Wallace says. Modern-day elements of the arbor include a boom box playing lullabies in native languages and a television set featuring images of arbors through the years.

Nearby display cases offer more insights into the day-to-day family life of western tribes, exhibiting games shared by generations and an assortment of beautifully painted and beaded pouches and containers designed for traveling light. Another display addresses the tribes' wide variety of housing styles, dispelling the myth that most Indians live in tepees.

"We Cherish Our Children" is the theme of one display, which features some of the most exquisite pieces in the museum's collections, Wallace says. Finely crafted cradleboards, baby moccasins, and beaded naval cases attest to how much children are loved and esteemed.

The final exhibit, "Change Through Time," was developed at the request of the nine tribes to help others understand what it really means to be Native American in the 21st Century. It follows the 100-year history of three fictional families from three tribes and describes how such institutions as boarding schools and the Christian church have influenced their identities and cultures.

While the gallery may seem to be overflowing with treasures, only about one-third of the permanent exhibits were in place opening day, Wallace says. Temporary display cases highlighting future exhibits are arranged throughout the gallery to give visitors a sneak peek at treasures to come.

Lasting Impressions

As guests leave the Hall of the People of Oklahoma, Wallace and other members of the Social Science Advisory Board hope they will take with them new perspectives on Oklahoma's rich Native American history and cultures.

"My biggest hope is that people will understand the diversity of native peoples in Oklahoma," she says. "There's no such thing as one Indian culture. All Native Americans aren't the same. There's wonderful diversity among these tribes, each with their own stories and lifestyles."

Galvan says the entire gallery is designed to help visitors "feel the history. You can hear the sounds of tribal elders sharing their people's origin stories, put your hand inside handprints created by present-day native people, look inside a Caddo village or imagine carrying a 22-foot canoe to the water's edge. That's personal.

"I can't see how anyone could leave this place not knowing the stories of Oklahoma's native people on a very personal level."

Mike Callaghan

