



Handprints on the Wall

BY BRENDA WHELOCK

Handprints long have served as symbols of our unique identity. In modern society, they have become part of the ritual of birth—an ink-on-paper impression of one's individuality recorded just moments after a child leaves its mother's womb.

In the McCasland Foundation Hall of the People of Oklahoma, handprints have taken on even deeper meaning, says exhibits planner Pamela S. Wallace. They are an icon for the passing down of culture and a monument to the diverse native peoples who inhabit Oklahoma today.

"When we were planning the exhibits for this gallery, one of the major themes that came forward was the passing on of culture from generation to generation," says Wallace, who chaired the advisory board of museum staff and tribal representatives charged with planning the gallery. "We decided to show this by creating a logo of an adult handprint with a child's small handprint inside."

Building on the handprint theme, the advisory board came up with an idea that has evolved into one of the museum's most popular attractions. An entire wall of Native American handprints, 136 in all, has been created to mark the gallery's entrance.

The handprints, which surround the gallery logo, are reverse-embossed, inviting visitors to touch and place their own hands within those on the wall.

To gather the handprints, the museum invited every tribe in Oklahoma to send delegates to Native American Handprint Day, held in February 2000. The delegates were from all walks of life, not just tribal elders and officials.

"We had 26 tribes that actually sent people to participate, which we thought was phenomenal," Wallace

says. "The youngest was 4 weeks old, and the oldest was 97."

The daylong event, held exclusively for delegates and their families, featured storytellers, dancers, and drummers. Tribal members of the museum's advisory board made presentations about their role in creating the native peoples' gallery.

As delegates cast their handprints, they each had photos taken and gave statements about what it meant

to them to participate in the historic event. Their comments and photos will be archived in the museum for future generations to share.

Joe Watkins, a Choctaw Indian and member of the museum advisory board, made handprints with his then 9-year-old son, Ethan, and 7-year-old daughter, Sydney.

"The kids were just hams—all of them, even the older people," he says. "We were all just laughing and smiling. It was a time of great sharing, and we all felt



Mike Callaghan

Visitors have a hard time walking into the Hall of the People of Oklahoma without placing their own hands in the handprints that adorn the entry wall. But for the 136 Native Americans from 26 tribes who created this wall, that action symbolizes the passing down of their culture from one generation to the next. Representatives of the tribes participated in Native American Handprint Day in February 2000 and returned for the official opening of the hall in September 2000 to see if their hands still fit the impressions.

we were providing something important for our descendants, maybe two or three generations down the line.

"The highlight for me was knowing that someday my children and their children will be able to come back and say, 'this is my dad's handprint,' and see whether their hand fits it," Watkins says. "It's a tangible reminder that I took part in actually developing this gallery."

An archaeologist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Watkins says the handprint has been a symbol of ownership or a sign of protection for generations of Native Americans.

"It's been important to American Indians throughout their journeys into the New World," he says. "It's important because we built our culture by hand, and this is a symbol of what our culture means to us."

"The hand is one of the things that makes us human. With the opposable thumb, we have the ability to use our hands to create, not only tools and technology, but the finer things in life, like the arts," he adds. "The handprint is a fitting symbol."

Watkins hopes visitors to the handprint wall will take away the message that "Oklahoma belongs to all of us."

