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PHOTOGRAPHER, MENTOR, GRANDFATHER

THOMAS POOLAW

There are at least 2,000 silver nitrate negatives in the Horace Poolaw collection, and as many stories to go along with them. If you begin to talk about one image, it leads from that story to the next, and the next, and pretty soon two or three hours have gone by. Rather than discussing in detail the images in the Horace Poolaw collection, I would like to discuss Horace Poolaw the man—a complex yet loving individual who was much more than just a photographer. It is still difficult for me to talk about a person whose influence helped shape my life.

Our family referred to Horace Poolaw simply as “Granpa.” Part of my research on Granpa was gifted to me as a child and teenager: I learned about my grandfather by sitting on his lap watching the Ed Sullivan Show on Sunday nights, by riding with him on his tractor at sundown to check on his cattle (a necessary ritual before he settled in for the night), by following his footsteps through the early morning frost on our way to feed his pigs. That handful of pigs had it made. Granpa would get up early in the morning and warm some water on the stove in a big stew pot. Outside he had a bucket filled with sweet feed that he mixed with the water. We’d carry the feed seventy-five yards to the pig pen and he would pour the feed into the trough with steam rising. Those pigs would go nuts.

Horace Poolaw and his wife, Winnie Poolaw, lived on their own property two miles west of Anadarko, Oklahoma, at the bottom of Shirley Hill. Living in the country, he would frequently come up with ideas that would warrant a trip into town. On most every occasion he would take the grandkids present. On the way to town was Dutcher’s store and in town was Dairy Queen. When I became older I realized Granpa had a voracious sweet tooth. As an elder, by taking kids along, he was entitled to a popsicle or a strawberry malt at the selected venue, and we kids were benefactors of this arrangement.

Thomas Poolaw is the grandson of Horace Poolaw and a member of the Kiowa tribe of Oklahoma. He is an artist based in Norman, Oklahoma, and his works have been displayed in the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian, the Denver Art Museum, and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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What I'm trying to say is that Horace Poolaw is a man who wore many hats. Early on, Granpa was an Oklahoma State Trooper. He was also a military aerial photographer, and had many other jobs before retiring west of Anadarko. Photography was his passion, and he took it very seriously.

I would like to say a few words regarding identity—about being Kiowa. In the Kiowa world you could approach three or four people and ask them to tell you one of our stories. You will probably get three or four different versions, but the central theme will be very consistent. This is the result of an oral history of a tribe that lived in separate bands most of the year. The only time they would gather was midsummer during the Kaw-to, or as non-Kiowas might say, during “Sundance” time. So, when Kiowas speak you might hear someone say, “This is how I was told,” or “This is how I understand it.” Kiowas are very particular about their culture and for a good reason: because it's theirs. Before I proceed, let me say to you that “this is how I understand it,” knowing that somewhere along the line I will be corrected.

Horace Poolaw is a product of a bloodline of chiefs and medicine people. His great-grandfather, a man named “Innards” or “Tumor,” is associated with a famous painted tipi cover in the tribe depicting a porcupine holding an arrow with many porcupines around the base of the tipi. This man also had several prominent sons; among them was “Tan-kongya,” which translates as “Black Warbonnet” (the name refers to the frontal of a war bonnet, or the beaded strip above the forehead). Tan-kongya, Horace Poolaw’s grandfather, was a band chief among the Kiowas.

Horace’s father was “Gui-pola.” The name refers to a “mature wolf.” Gui-pola was also known as Kiowa George Poolaw. One of the last Kiowa buffalo medicine men, he made use of the sweat lodge and was known to have other medicine that he used to help people. Kiowa George was also an arrow maker and a keeper of the Kiowa calendar—a way of documenting tribal history with pictographs that unlock the collective mind of the people, allowing events that transpired during the year associated with the drawing to be recalled and related. Whether intentionally or not, Horace Poolaw’s photographs seem to serve as an extension of the Kiowa calendar. For example, I remember our family pulling out albums and shoe boxes of photos, especially when we had visitors. The photos would generate discussions, stories, jokes and, often, much laughter.

For the majority of my life, I have been ingrained in these photos. I passively learned from the graphic qualities of these images and from my grandfather’s photographic process. From the beginning of my career, Horace Poolaw’s photographs have served as an inspiration. I also learned so much from him as a person and I couldn’t have custom ordered a better grandfather. In recent years, I have infused modern technology and my own image-making process with my grandfather’s images. I would like to say that these works compose a small percentage of my overall body of work over the course of my career. I have used Horace Poolaw’s photographs as inspiration from the very beginning of my career, and I believe that any photographic means of making an image that I use cannot help but be informed, inspired, and enriched by knowledge gained from looking at my grandfather’s work.

I would like to say that Horace Poolaw continues to be a powerful source of inspiration to me as an artist. In the spring of 2009, my sister and I were able to attend the opening reception for the exhibition “Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The curator, Eva Respini, selected a Horace Poolaw hand-colored gelatin silver print of “Dorothy Ware with her son Justin Lee Ware.” A listing of the seventy or so photographers in the show reads like a “who’s who” of the medium: Ansel Adams, Robert Frank, Edward Weston, Eadward J. Muybridge, Minor White, Diane Arbus, Larry Clark, David Hockney, Gary Winogrand, John Baldessari, Cindy Sherman, and Dennis Hopper, to name a few. To see Granpa’s work displayed in such an elite venue alongside the work of such esteemed photographers. . . as an artist/grandson, it just doesn’t get much better than that.