



2026

OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

CULTURE | ISSUES | IDEAS

ADAPT



CAROLINE LOWERY

Executive Director
caroline@okhumanities.org

PERSPECTIVE

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

To live in Oklahoma is to understand adaptation. Our landscape teaches this lesson well. Spring thunderstorms yield to relentless summer heat. Prairie grasses bend with the wind. In my corner of the state, ancient oaks have endured centuries of drought, wildfire, ice storms, and changing climates. Their strength comes from deep roots and a quiet resilience that allows them to grow through every season.

Oklahoma Humanities, I am proud to say, has demonstrated a similar resilience in the face of tremendous challenges.

This past year brought some of the most significant uncertainty in our organization's history. The unexpected loss of federal funding required difficult decisions, including reducing staff, reshaping how we operate, and rethinking how we fulfill our mission. Those choices were not easy, but they were necessary to ensure that Oklahoma Humanities would endure.

Today, we stand on firmer ground. We have strengthened our financial foundation by broadening our base of support and becoming less dependent on a single source of funding. New partnerships are taking shape, generous supporters have stepped forward, and we are carefully rebuilding our capacity with an eye toward long-term sustainability. As resources allow, we look forward to expanding our work, strengthening existing programs,

and helping Oklahomans to learn, connect, and engage with one another. The future will not look exactly like the past, and perhaps that is as it should be. The path ahead is still unfolding, but our purpose remains constant.

In many ways, the humanities have guided us through this experience. History reminds us that every generation inherits a changing world. Literature invites us into lives beyond our own. Philosophy encourages us to question assumptions. Together, they help us understand change, make sense of uncertainty, and imagine what comes next by answering the questions that have always mattered most.

Who are we? What do we value? How do we build stronger communities? How do we better understand one another?

As we have for more than fifty years, Oklahoma Humanities will continue to create opportunities for Oklahomans to explore ideas together, listen to one another, and discover common ground. Like the ancient oaks that continue to flourish despite harsh conditions, we draw strength from deep roots while growing toward the future. The humanities help us remember where we have been, understand where we are today, and imagine where we might go next.

Growth begins with curiosity. Understanding begins with listening. And adaptation, often, begins with hope.

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Chris Kofoed. unsplash.com.





Nicole Avagliano. unsplash.com.

SIDENOTE

KIMBERLY ROBLIN

kimberly@okhumanities.org

“Ask again later.”

The response elicited groans each time it bobbed to the surface. The Magic 8 Ball’s ambiguity vexed us more than the definitive “As I see it, no.” We wanted certainty as kids, toy or not. As adults, we still think about what lies ahead. But no ball—crystal, Magic 8, or otherwise—can tell us. While we cannot predict the future, we do have a remarkable ability to navigate nearly everything the future might hold. We adapt.

This versatile and valuable skill operates alongside other traits critical to our survival as a species: pattern recognition, problem solving, curiosity, imagination, and creativity. Some adaptation is unconscious. Exercise increases heart rate. Sweat lowers body temperature. Our bodies just react. Some adaptation is subconscious. We find another route when there’s construction. We turn on the windshield wipers when it rains. We don’t necessarily think through these steps. We simply react in real time.

Then there is conscious adaptation, often in response to a new situation, a challenge, or development. A move. A marriage. Starting a job. Losing a job. A health scare. We also adapt external objects, items, landscapes, and ideas to solve problems, make improvements, or better suit our preferences.

No matter the details, this kind of adaptation is about responding. We assess the present, apply lessons from the past, imagine the future, analyze outcomes, and make a choice. We imagine possibilities and potential. As the articles and essays in this issue demonstrate, to adapt, or to decide not to, is to exert agency. Adaptation is an action.

Osage women saw the potential of incorporating U.S. military coats into their wedding outfits. A young man in nineteenth-century Vermont wondered if it was possible to combine a microscope with a camera to photograph snowflakes. Some in the U.S. Army imagined that camels might be perfect pack animals for the American Southwest. A Persian couple envisioned a life built on music and moved to central Oklahoma. And an educator deliberates the harm in teaching a curated version of American history.

This issue, in its entirety, is also an adaptation. What was biannual is now annual. What was printed is now only digital. The format and frequency may have changed, but there is still a magazine. There are still donors generous enough to support it. Still authors gracious enough to contribute to it. And still people interested enough to read it.

Will there always be?

As I see it, yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Caroline Lowery
caroline@okhumanities.org

EDITOR

Kimberly Roblin
kimberly@okhumanities.org

Oklahoma Humanities magazine is an award-winning collection of cultures, issues, and ideas—a rich mix of humanities scholarship, insightful narratives, informed opinions, and beautiful images, for a read that is smart, balanced, educational, and entertaining. It reaches Oklahomans in all 77 counties and is free of advocacy and advertising, supported by donors like you.

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The magazine has been published since 2008 by Oklahoma Humanities, PO Box 31733, Edmond, OK 73003, (405) 235-0280, ohc@okhumanities.org. Our privacy policy is posted on our website.

Oklahoma Humanities is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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Fran Parchcorn

**THE 2026
EDITOR'S CIRCLE**

Donors who designate gifts of \$500 or more for *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine join the Editor's Circle. Thanks to these generous donors, we have historically distributed this award-winning publication free of charge to Oklahomans in all 77 counties. Thank you—we're grateful for your generosity!

This year has not been easy. Yet, through resilience, creativity, and your steadfast support, we are still here—and still connecting Oklahomans through the humanities.

We have adapted to meet this moment. Even in challenging times, our mission endures. We remain committed to providing access to the humanities for every Oklahoman; in every county, at every table, and in every conversation.

Oklahoma Humanities remains stable, accountable, and dedicated to the communities we serve.

As we close this year, we ask for your support to help sustain and expand this vital work. Your tax-deductible gift makes an immediate impact.



Donate online at okhumanities.org/donate or scan the QR code.

Every donation today—no matter the size—protects the future of our work.





NEW RELATIONS

Osage Wedding Coats

BY DANIEL C. SWAN AND ANITA FIELDS

In 1804, President Thomas Jefferson invited delegations from the known tribes of the lower Missouri River Valley to Washington D.C. as a prelude to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Among the first Native Americans from the Plains to visit the White House were members of the Osage Nation, led by Chief Pawhuska. Osage oral history and government records document that they received gifts of military-style clothing, including coats, while there. But the large, physical stature of Osage men made the coats a poor fit. They did, however, fit their daughters who quickly incorporated them into their wedding regalia, and wore them as status items.

OSAGE WEDDINGS

The Osage people are very deliberate in their actions and do not embrace innovations or additions to their traditional practices without extensive reflection and consideration. At an early point in their history, the Osage people developed a system of arranged marriages that were celebrated with cycles of gift exchange and feasting. When an Osage mother and father had a son who was ready for marriage, they would call together all their relations and discuss the matter. They looked for a girl of marriageable age who came from a respected family within the Osage tribe,

a family that was at least their equivalent within the community with parents who were married in the same manner that they wished for their son. On the girl's side, the family was passive and waited to be approached by a boy's family with a proposal.

If a proposal was accepted for consideration, the groom's family would establish a substantial camp a short distance from the home of the prospective bride. From this camp the boy's family would take prepared food for four days to the girl's relatives to demonstrate the lifestyle she would enjoy if the proposal was accepted. On the fourth day many fine horses, thirty or more, were delivered to the bride's father as a gift from the groom's family.

Traditional Osage marriage ceremonies were secular in nature, comprising a series of public events with family and members of the broader community attending. On the day of the wedding the bride and several bridesmaids gathered at the bride's home where they were dressed in their wedding regalia by female relatives. After the dressing of the wedding party, the bride was placed on a prized horse that was covered with decorated blankets, beaded martingales, and German silver headstalls. Two older male relatives, carrying American flags, followed the bride with members of the

bride's extended family joining the procession. They traveled the short distance to a point near the groom's camp where they stopped and a gun was fired to signal the start of a race in which the groom's female relatives raced to the bride. The winner received the bride's horse as a prize.

Following the race, the bride was lifted off the horse, placed on a blanket and carried into a covered arbor by the female relatives of the groom. These women then undressed the bride and bridesmaids, providing them with new clothing to replace their wedding finery. After all were seated for the dinner, the town crier called out for the groom who was then seated next to his bride. When they ate together the marriage was completed and the newlyweds were then counseled by tribal elders. They were told what was expected of them as a traditional Osage couple, and why they were married in this manner.

ADOPTING AND ADAPTING

One of the most striking aspects of Osage weddings was the attire worn by the bride and her attendants. The Osage people readily adopted European trade items into their traditional aesthetic, as access to new materials and the tools to work them led to novel approaches and new artistic forms. Osage wedding outfits exemplify this pattern of adoption and adaptation in several ways. The outfits consisted of swallowtail military-style coats with brass epaulets, that were decorated in various manners, such as ribbon work. Osage ribbon work includes several techniques in which layers of silk or taffeta ribbon are cut, folded and sewn together to create a range of designs that are accentuated by dramatic color juxtaposition. The coats were secured with wide finger-woven belts of yarn and beads. Finger weaving encompasses a variety of fiber braiding techniques that are found around the world. It is used to create woven strips without the use of a loom. The Osage worked buffalo hair yarn in this technique prior to European contact.

Osage brides also wore top hats surrounded with multi-colored plumes held in place by German silver bands or ribbons. Underneath this outerwear brides wore a set of traditional Osage women's attire, comprising skirts and half

leggings of wool trade cloth decorated with ribbon work, silk blouses, finger-woven belts, and German silver, pierced brooches. Not only were these bridal outfits very elaborate and costly, the bride and bridesmaids may be wearing two to three layers of this clothing. The coats and the layers of traditional attire were then gifted to the groom's female relatives.

Following the introduction of "chiefs coats" into the ceremony, the Osage employed various means to secure the military-style coats. Several community members identified commercial sources including suppliers of marching band and military academy uniforms. While external sources provided direct access to this garment, the Osage were quick to use their talents and skills to produce wedding coats that better reflected the design preferences and standards of the community. Museum collections and historic photographs indicate that these early community-produced coats did not incorporate the swallowtail design of the Colonial-era military coats and were less tailored.

RESURGENCE

Traditional Osage weddings waned in the 1930s and were rare after World War II, but wedding coats experienced a resurgence with their incorporation into a new social setting. The *Ilo'shka* is the Osage version of the Grass Dance, a social movement that swept the Plains and Prairies regions in the late nineteenth century. The Grass Dance was a dancing society that preserved and perpetuated many traditional values while providing a focal point for the contemporary expression of individual and group identities. The *Ilo'shka* has been an important part of the cultural life of Osage people for over a century.

As a formal society the *Ilo'shka* is organized around a committee of ceremonial officers and a formal membership. At the head of the organization is the Drumkeeper, charged with the sponsorship of the annual dance in his community. The transition or "Passing of the Drum" from one Drumkeeper to another creates new sets of social relationships through the reformulation of the *Ilo'shka* committees. To acknowledge the



Marion Coshehe (right) standing with bridesmaid Lillie Morrell (left) at her traditional Osage wedding in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, ca. 1930. Courtesy of Jim Cooley.



Chief Pawhuska wearing a military coat with epaulettes, a peace medal, and trade silver armbands presented to him by President Thomas Jefferson. *Payouska Chief of the Big Osage*. Sketch by Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, 1804. Saint-Mémin Print Collection, PR 226. Courtesy of New York Historical Society Museum and Library.



Myrtle Morrell-Albert Maker wedding, Hominy, Oklahoma, 1936. The bride (center, in light colored coat) and her attendants are standing in front of the residence of the bride's father, Robert Morrell. This expansive, two-story brick house is representative of Osage homes constructed in the 1920s. Courtesy of Osage Nation Museum.



Osage Woman's Wedding Outfit including Coat, Hat, and Sash. Worn by Mary Morrell Redeagle (1900-1963) for her marriage to Paul C. Beartrack (Southern Cheyenne) in 1927 or 1928; inherited by Mary's daughter Fannie Mae Beartrack Donelson (Osage/Southern Cheyenne, 1933-2013). Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

honor of being chosen for such an important position, the new Drumkeeper conducts an elaborate giveaway to distribute gifts to the outgoing Drumkeeper and to his newly formed committee. Prominent among these gifts are several sets of traditional Osage wedding attire worn by family members and friends of the new Drumkeeper.

The incorporation of wedding attire in the Ilo^oshka in the 1940s was a pivotal event in the history of Osage wedding coats. Once again, the Osage adapted them to their social and cultural fabric. These initial coats used in Paying for the Drum were likely from the Osage weddings of the early twentieth century. As this source of coats waned, the Osage community increased their production of wedding coats that emulated the style and cut of military uniforms while featuring increased decorative elements and a more tailored design.

This unique Osage wedding clothing is today emblematic of Osage National identity, especially in external relations with other Native communities. It is common for the Osage Nation Princess to wear bridal attire during the annual American Indian Exposition in Anadarko, Oklahoma, one of the largest inter-tribal events in the state. Bridal outfits were also prominent in the parade that celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Osage Nation Museum in 2013. Contemporary wedding coats and hats are increasingly worn by modern Osage brides, marking a minor resurgence of traditional wedding regalia.

ARTISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

In this legacy of adaptation and innovation, Osage artist Anita Fields uses wedding coats as a canvas to express her reflections on Osage history and identity. An accomplished ceramic artist, Anita has been recognized by multiple grants, fellowships and residencies, and her art is represented in prestigious museum collections. Anita is well-versed in the traditional values and beliefs of her Osage ancestors including those related to art and aesthetics. Under the mentorship of her grandmother, Nettie White Luttrell, Anita became proficient in the textile arts of the Osage people. This interest led her to conceive and



It's in Our DNA—It's Who We Are. Anita Fields (Osage), 2019. Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Courtesy of Tom Fields.



To Know Your People Are Beautiful. Anita Fields (Osage) and Welana Queton (Osage/Muscogee), 2019. Eiteljorg Museum. Courtesy of Anita Fields.

execute a series of modern interpretations of Osage wedding coats. She recently reflected on the coats:

I feel this real closeness to our clothing, the way we make these expressions through our garments, how we utilize them. You know whether you are making it for somebody or giving it to somebody, that is an expression. I'm going to talk about transformation a little bit because of my feelings about clothing in terms of art, identity, and transformation. You put your Indian clothes on and are immersed in our ways, you are an Osage person connected to our ancestors.

My feelings for wedding coats are so strong. They are in my mind and in my heart as one of the items that is so iconic that I'm certain it will never go away. And it is that importance that caused our ancestors to find a niche for it in the *Ilo'shka* dances. And even though we know that they will be given away when they pay for the drum, it's such a highlight. We're anxious to see what the family has done. I often refer to these coats as walking history. These Osage wedding coats are so connected to time and place they create historic moments.

It really took a few years for me to follow through on my thoughts about making a wedding coat. I had conversations with several people that I'm close with. I wanted to make certain that I didn't cross any lines. I didn't believe that these coats are a sacred item, I never thought of them like that, and I've never heard them talked about like that. Wedding coats have a very high function and meaning in our community. I wanted to keep the coat recognizable. I didn't want to get so far out there that somebody wouldn't recognize it as an Osage wedding coat. I started thinking of ways I could embellish it to expand that story and our history.

Anita expanded the expressive potential of Osage wedding coats by utilizing both the exterior and interior of the coat as domains for artistic and symbolic expression. Her use of the interior of the coat creates a space for personal observations and memories regarding the cultural and political heritage of the Osage Nation. This approach creates a physical representation of the outward-facing visual arts of the Osage people and the underlying cultural, historic, and social knowledge that both informs and inspires artistic expression.

She employs a range of techniques and materials to create her wedding coats, embracing traditional forms and styles while accessing modern technology. Primary among her use of digital tools is a process to print photos and documents on the fabric she uses to line the coats. Much of the decorative treatment on Anita's wedding coats are highly symbolic in nature, referencing important political, cultural, and economic aspects of Osage history and identity. Her coats display an approach evident in her ceramic and textile works that consistently emphasizes art as a means of education.

This was really a step forward for me. I never used family photos in my work. But then something changed in me. I realized that I had an opportunity to immortalize, to recognize my great-grandfather and grandmother forever here, in these coats. I like that, you know, because they gave me this way of thinking.

It's In Our DNA- It's Who We Are, is a coat that Anita produced for the national traveling exhibition *From the Heart of the People*, the first major exhibition of works created by Indigenous women. In this coat Anita addresses the importance of family, lineage, and heritage in the identity of the Osage people. The exterior of the coat features strands of DNA on the front bodice and a photograph of her great-grandfather is centered in the interior of the coat. The interior also features images of the Prairie Cone Flower, enhanced with beadwork. The Prairie Cone Flower is one of the life symbols of the Osage people, one



Drumkeeper, George Shaw, with 'brides' at the Paying for the Drum ceremony at the Grayhorse Ilo'shka, June 1, 2023. Photo by Sherry Stinson. Courtesy of Osage News.

of many natural elements whose characteristics exemplified the prayer of all Osage people that their children might live long lives.

With her daughter, Welana Queton, Anita created a coat, *To Know Your People Are Beautiful*, that reflects on the origin of the Osage people and their survival despite colonial policies and treaties. Many Osage creation stories state that they descended to earth from the sky, represented on this coat by the beaded figures falling through the stars. The coat also celebrates two of the food sources sacred to the Osage people, represented by cross sections of the water lotus root, embroidered on the exterior of the upper sleeves, and the corn plants, beaded on the interior. Both plants are life symbols and came into being in conjunction with the origin of the Osage people.

When this coat was exhibited at Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, it was surrounded by two-dimensional cutouts of characters from the Osage orthography, designs found in Osage traditional art and clothing, and colorful pompoms—details from Osage finger weaving. This created a powerful presence, a statement of sovereignty, and a counter to the repressive intent of the allotment of the Osage reservation.

When I was thinking about this installation, I wanted to incorporate symbols from our culture that we as Osage people would recognize. A combination of things that I could try and put in some type of order. Designs from our ribbon work, braiding that we use in our finger weaving and symbols from our orthography.



There are books from the nineteenth century where people wrote horrible things that distorted and demeaned the Osage people. We never needed those words to define us. I cut those forms, those symbols, from copies of these books and documents. We didn't need anybody to define us, we know who we are through our culture, through our language, through our art.

Osage wedding coats are truly unique creations, the product of a complex process of adoption, incorporation and enhancement, as opposed to a mechanical blending of physical elements. The Osage people accepted a foreign garment that was gifted to their leaders as a symbol of American power and dominance and transformed

it into an object of unity and celebration. The power of Osage wedding coats is realized in their public display; historically in Osage weddings, as an important element in the Paying for the Drum ceremony, and more recently in the artistic creations of Osage artist Anita Fields. The skills of adaptation, incorporation, and reinvention have served the Osage people well throughout their history.

DANIEL C. SWAN is Professor/Curator *emeritus*, Sam Noble Museum, University of Oklahoma. He is the author (with Jim Cooley) of *Wedding Clothes and the Osage Community* (2019). Indiana University Press.

ANITA FIELDS is a National Endowment of Arts Heritage Fellow (2021), and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2025). To view more of her art visit anitafieldsart.com.

A lot for a Little Snowflake

Killington, Vermont. Emily Ho. unsplash.com.

Winter welcomed Wilson Bentley to the world on February 9, 1865, in Jericho, Vermont. Nature's beauty and mystery surrounded him as he grew up on the family farm, and he spent his life pursuing its secrets through science and photography. By combining a microscope with a camera, he became the first known person to successfully photograph snowflakes, or snow crystals, when he was only nineteen. For almost fifty years, the "Snowflake Man" photographed, researched weather events and conditions, lectured, and wrote articles. His work culminated in a book, *Snow Crystals*. Artisans and designers even adapted his photographs for their fabrics, metal work, jewelry, and stained-glass windows. Singular, like the snowflakes he photographed, he passed away on December 23, 1931, ushered by winter once again.

...

"I am intensely interested," he said to a visitor the other day, "in showing the people the beauty in the common things of nature. I have no use for the man who makes his life work that of making money, for money seldom means realization of beauty.

"I work when the temperature is between 15 and 20 degrees above zero or lower. I take a blackboard about 10 by 12 inches and catch some of the falling flakes on it then taking them inside I look at them through the microscope and if any appear especially worth while [sic] they are placed on a glass slide by taking them up on a splinter of wood. This operation is a very difficult and delicate one, for it requires a light touch in order not to break up the flake. Once on the slide it is placed under the microscope camera and photographed and the results are generally beautiful. During the entire time it is necessary to refrain from breathing on the flake or it will evaporate, and the delicate touch necessary to pick the flake up on the splinter requires a steady hand. I

believe that my total abstinence from the use of liquor, tobacco, tea or coffee has helped me in this work greatly."

...

The collection of pictures have considerable money value, but from the scientific viewpoint are of infinite value. In all the flakes he has handled in his lifetime Mr. Bentley said that they would not make a good snowball if rolled together, yet they have given him 3,500 pictures, and from these he has made hundreds of thousands of prints.

...

Tiffany, the great New York jeweler, also sent to Mr. Bentley for 200 photographs used for designs in their jewelry business.

...

"I believe the purpose of living is to increase human betterment and happiness. The man who lives to see the beauty of nature and to teach the finer and more beautiful things of life is far more useful to humanity than the man who lives to earn money."

From "Jericho's Famous Snowflake Man," *The Milton Rays*. August 21, 1919.

The lowly and yet mighty snowflake is apparently fast on the road to coming into its own. For much of this it can thank Wilson A. Bentley of Jericho, Vt., who has a collection of some 4000 snowflakes, the largest collection in the world, and no two flakes alike.

Readers of *The News* [sic] learned on Friday of last week something of what Mr. Bentley is doing along lines of scientific research and study of these snow crystals. Now comes an article in McClure's Magazine [sic] which goes into greater detail concerning his work. In this article it is declared that at the Autumn Exposition and Industrial Arts Exhibit recently held by Marshall Field and Company in Chicago there was a remarkable display of fabric designs adapted from snow and frost crystal photographs.

"For 35 years Wilson A. Bentley of Jericho, Vermont, has devoted his time to a scientific study of snowflakes, raindrops, dew, and clouds," the article states. "Of the more than four thousand photomicrographs of snowflakes he has made, no two have ever been found to be exactly alike.

"Bentley's snow and frost-crystal photomicrographs are used by metal workers, art-craft shops, jewelers, textile and lace workers, and in schools for studies in art and designing.

"Snow and frost designs, says Mr. Bentley, 'would furnish exquisite designs for chinaware, embroideries, metal ceilings, or cathedral windows. Only recently I furnished some snow-crystal photographs for designs in the windows of a Boston church.'

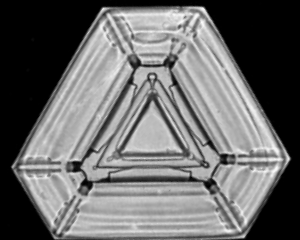
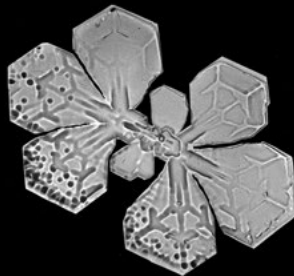
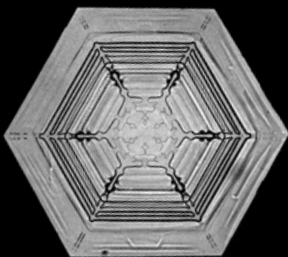
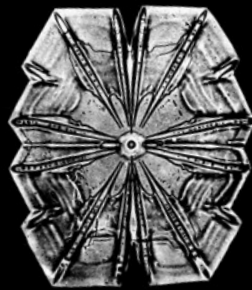
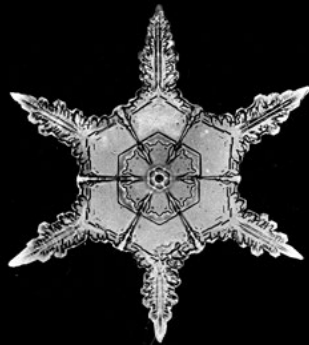
"About two years ago Mr. John B. Taylor, of the designing department of the Phoenix Silk Company of New York began a study of snow-and-frost-crystal photographs. The possibilities of their adaptation for decorations on silk and damasks appealed to him. Several designs were made and sent to the looms. 'They met with instant popularity,' says Mr. Taylor. 'Our goods carrying these designs were widely used, particularly for cloak and suit linings. They are among the most striking and beautiful designs we have.'

"Lace-makers also have begun to realize the possibilities of snow and frost crystals—particularly frost crystals—for designing hints."

That's a lot for a little snowflake. But seriously, Mr. Bentley has done the world a great service. His work, which is unique and probably stands alone in excellence if not in the work itself, deserves wider recognition than it has apparently so far received.

From "The Snowflake Man," *The Burlington Daily News*. January 2, 1923.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A selection of Bentley's photographs, all housed at the Smithsonian Institution Archives. FIRST ROW (L to R): Stellar, No. 562; Tabular, No. 482; Stellar, No. 10. SECOND ROW (L to R): Stellar, No. 990; Dendrite, No. 342; Stellar, No. 1206. THIRD ROW (L to R): Dendrite, No. 591; Tabular, No. 1209; Stellar, No. 579A. FOURTH ROW (L to R): Lamellar, No. 234; Tabular, No. 349; Lamellar, No. 801.



Wilson Alwyn Bentley, who died yesterday, was one of the most unique men Vermont has produced. He was born and spent his entire life in Jericho, except for occasional pilgrimages to metropolitan centers when called to impart his vast store of information regarding snow crystals.

Small in stature and by no means imposing in appearance, W.A. Bentley nevertheless possessed genius. He had the soul of an artist, a divine spark which caught hold upon the idea that snowflakes are as beautiful individually as they are collectively and investigated that idea to the extent of photographing many thousands of these lovely snow crystals and cataloging more than 5,000 of them, no two of which were found to be alike.

We remarked that Bentley was a genius. Longfellow said that genius is infinite painstaking. John Ruskin declared that genius is only a superior power of seeing. Wilson Bentley was a living example of this type of genius. He saw something in the snowflakes which other men failed to see, not because they could not see, but because they had not the patience and the understanding to look . . .

His snowflake photography brought Bentley little or nothing from a monetary standpoint. But that seemed never to worry him, for he was happy in his work. One had only to talk with him for a few moments to realize that . . .

Here was a man so unassuming that he seldom sought public recognition, so devoted to his investigations at Jericho that it was with difficulty that he was persuaded to leave them to give lectures about this interesting science that he had discovered, as he was often called upon to do in the last years of his life.

And here was a man who was sought as a member of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science and the American Meteorological Society, and who was recognized not only in the United States but throughout the world as an authority in his line.

Truly greatness blooms in quiet corners and flourishes under strange circumstances. For Wilson Bentley was a greater man than many a millionaire who lives in luxury of which the "Snowflake Man" never dreamed. *Burlington Free Press*.

From "Bentley's Contribution," *The Hardwick Gazette*. December 31, 1931.



Wilson A. Bentley. Used with permission of the Jericho Historical Society. jerichohistoricalsociety.org.

THE U.S. ARMY'S "CAMEL CORPS" EXPERIMENT

BY VINCE HAWKINS

**HOME, HOME ON THE RANGE
WHERE THE DEER AND THE ANTELOPE . . .
AND THE CAMELS PLAY?**

Vince Hawkins explores this curious footnote in American history that was an exercise in adaptation and persistence. This article originally appeared in *On Point* magazine. It has been edited for space and reprinted with the permission of The Army Historical Society. armyhistory.org.



In his annual report in 1854, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis informed Congress:

I again invite attention to the advantages to be anticipated from the use of camels and dromedaries for military and other purposes, and, for the reasons set forth in my last annual report, recommend that an appropriation be made to introduce a small number of the several varieties of this animal, to test their adaptation to our country . . .

On March 3, 1855, Congress agreed and passed the Shield amendment to the appropriation bill, resolving: *“And be it further enacted, That the sum of thirty thousand dollars be, and the same is hereby, appropriated, to be expended under the direction of the War Department in the purchase and importation of camels and importation of dromedaries, to be employed for military purposes.”* Secretary Davis would finally get his camels.

Davis lost no time in getting the experiment underway. In May 1855, he appointed Major Henry C. Wayne of the Quartermaster Department to head the expedition to acquire the camels. The Navy store ship *USS Supply*, was provided by the Navy to transport the camels to the United States. The *Supply* was under the command of Lt. David Dixon Porter, who, on being informed of the mission and its cargo, saw to it that she was outfitted with special hatches, stable areas, and a “camel car” to load and transport the animals in relative comfort and safety during their long voyage.

When Wayne inspected the *Supply*, he was both amazed and greatly impressed with Porter’s meticulous and thorough preparations. It was decided that while Wayne went to London and Paris to visit the zoos and interview military men and scientists with first-hand knowledge and experience in camel handling, Porter would sail the *Supply* to the Mediterranean and deliver supplies to the U.S. naval squadron based there. On July 24, Wayne joined Porter in Spezzia (La Spezia), Italy, and from there they sailed to the Levant, arriving at Goletta (La Goulette) in the Gulf of Tunis on August 4.

Sahara Desert, Morocco. Jessica Arias, 2019. unsplash.com.

In Goletta, the expedition acquired their first three camels. Arriving in Tunis they were joined by Mr. Gwynne Harris Heap, who was familiar with Eastern languages and customs and his extensive knowledge of camels proved an invaluable asset to the expedition. During the next five months the expedition sailed across the Mediterranean, stopping at Malta, Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. Wayne, Porter, and Heap also made a separate voyage on their own to the Crimea to speak with British officers about their use of camels during the Crimean War. A similar side trip was made to Cairo while the *Supply* was docked at Alexandria.

After numerous difficulties involving a lack of suitable animals and obtaining export permits, the expedition finally acquired through purchase

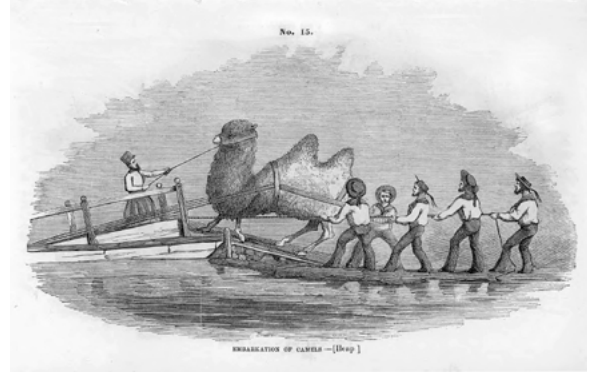
and as gifts a sufficient number of camels. In all, they obtained thirty-three animals: twenty females and thirteen males. The thirty-three specimens included two Bactrian (two-humped), nine dromedaries (one-humped), nineteen Arabian, one Tunis burden, one Arabian calf, and one *Tuilu* or *Booghdee* camel. The Arabian dromedaries are renowned for their swiftness and the Bactrians for their strength and burden carrying abilities. Thanks to Heap's knowledge of camels and his negotiating skills, the cost averaged around \$250 per animal, and most were in good condition. The expedition also hired five Arabs and Turks to help care for the animals during the voyage and act as drovers when they reached America. On February 15, 1856, with the



A comparison of landscapes by John Singer Sargent and Edgar Payne reveals the striking similarities between the topography of Egypt and Arizona. LEFT: *Cliffs at Deir el Bahri, Egypt*. John Singer Sargent. Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, 1950. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. RIGHT: *Canyon Portal*, ca. 1935. Edgar Payne. Minneapolis Institute of Art.

animals safely loaded aboard, the expedition began its voyage home.

The expedition, slowed by storms and heavy gales, lasted nearly three months. It was Porter's foresight and diligence in caring for the animals that enabled them to survive the horrendous weather conditions. The *Supply* finally unloaded its cargo on May 14 at Indianola, Texas. During the voyage one female camel had died, but six calves were born, of which two had survived the trip. The expedition therefore landed with a total of thirty-four camels, all of whom were in better health than when they left their native soil. On June 4, after allowing the camels some needed rest and a chance to acclimatize themselves, Wayne marched the herd 120 miles to San Antonio, arriving on June 18.



"Embarkation of Camels" from *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of February 2, 1857, Information Respecting the Purchase of Camels for the Purposes of Military Transports*. Washington, D.C., 1857. A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer. Library of Congress.





A correspondent of the Richmond Examiner, encamped near San Antonio, on his way to California, thus writes of the camels, which have been imported for the government service:

Monday, June the 22nd, Lieut. Beale returned from Camp Verde. We were all on the *qui vive* for the camels, which he had left behind in San Antonio, in order that he might prepare for their reception. We had been told that our mules and horses would be much frightened at their appearance, and we were not a little curious to see the result of their meeting. Our suspense was not of long duration. Just as the gray of evening was coming on, the clang, clang, clang of bells in the distance announced their approach, and in a



Camels in Morocco. Janice Kwong, 2022. unsplash.com.

few moments the long wished for caravan hove in sight and we, for the first time, I suppose, in the life of every man of us, saw as many as twenty five camels advancing in single file . . . Perhaps there may have been nothing which many persons might regard as particularly moving in the sight, but the effect on me was rather peculiar. The dim twilight, which made them seem like so many spectral shadows—the measured tone of the bells, like “drowsy tinklings”—the shouting of the drivers . . . combined to make a scene impressive.

—From “The Camels in Texas,” *Los Angeles Star*. November 7, 1857.



Wayne planned to establish a ranch and provide facilities for breeding the camels, but Secretary Davis had other ideas, stating, *The establishment of a breeding farm did not enter into the plans of the department. The object at present is to ascertain whether the animal is adapted to the military service, and can be economically and usefully employed therein.* Despite his objections, Davis did see the advantages in sending Porter on a second trip to secure more camels. There was over half of the appropriation money remaining and the *Supply* was still on loan from the Navy. On Davis's instructions, Porter once again set sail. In late August, Wayne moved the herd some sixty miles northwest to Camp Verde, a more suitable location for his caravansary. Camp Verde would be the "corps" home for many years.

To satisfy Davis's concerns about the military usefulness of the camels, Wayne devised a small field test. He sent three wagons, each with a six-mule team, and six camels to San Antonio for a supply of oats. The mule drawn wagons, each carrying about 1,800 pounds of oats, took approximately four days to make the return trip to camp. The six camels carried 3,648 pounds of oats and made the trip in two days, clearly demonstrating both their carrying ability and their speed. Several other tests served to confirm the transporting abilities of the camels

and their superiority over horses and mules. Davis was much pleased with the results.

Over the next several months, Wayne worked with the civilian drovers and soldiers to accustom them to the camels and vice versa. They learned how to care for and feed the animals, manage the cumbersome camel saddles, properly pack the animals and, most importantly, how to deal with the camel's mannerisms and temperament. By nature the camel is a docile animal, but can demonstrate a violent, aggressive temper when abused or mistreated, literally kicking, biting or stomping an antagonist to death. Camels, like cows, chew a type of cud and when annoyed would often spit a large, gelatinous, foul-smelling mass of cud at its detractor.

On January 30, 1857, Porter returned to the U.S. with an additional forty-one camels. Since by this time five of the original herd had died from disease, the new arrivals brought the total number of camels to seventy. The animals were landed at Indianola on February 10 and then moved to Camp Verde.

In March 1857, James Buchanan became president and several changes were made which directly affected the camel experiment. John B. Floyd replaced Davis as Secretary of War and Major Wayne was transferred back to the Quartermaster Department in Washington, DC,

thus removing in one blow two of the camel experiment's main supporters. Nevertheless, Secretary Floyd decided to continue his predecessor's experiment.

Congress had authorized a survey to build a wagon road along the thirty-fifth parallel from Fort Defiance, New Mexico Territory, to the Colorado River on the California/Arizona border. Mr. Edward Fitzgerald Beale, a former Superintendent of Indian Affairs for California and Nevada, was appointed the task. Beale was a good choice for the survey, having traveled parts of this region during the Mexican War and while surveying a route for a transcontinental railway.

It was only after Beale accepted the appointment that he learned of the Secretary of War's special conditions. Floyd ordered Beale to take approximately twenty-five camels with him on the surveying expedition. Since Wayne had left Camp Verde, the camels had been unused. The government had gone to some time and expense to test the camels in just this kind of situation and Floyd was determined to see if they would justify the money being spent on them. Although strongly opposed to the idea, Beale finally consented.

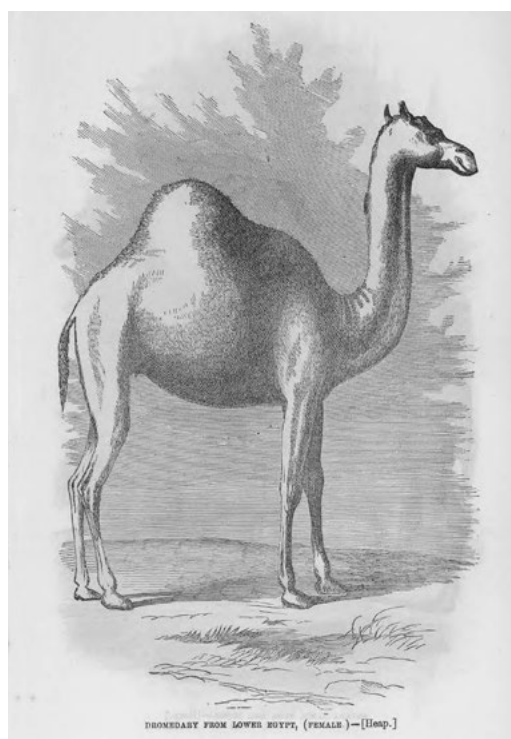
On June 25, 1857, the surveying expedition departed for Fort Defiance. At first, the performance of the camels convinced Beale that his original protests were

well-founded, as the animals moved slower than the horses and mules and were usually hours late reaching camp. On the second week of the journey, however, Beale changed his tune. He later attributed the camel's slow start to their months of idleness and ease at Camp Verde. It was not long after that the camels settled to their task and began outdistancing both horses and mules, packing a 700-pound load at a steady speed and traversing ground that caused the other animals to balk.

By the time the expedition arrived at Fort Defiance in August, Beale was convinced of the camel's abilities. On July 24 he wrote to Floyd:

It gives me pleasure to report the entire success of the experiment with the camels so far as I have tried it. Laboring under all the disadvantages . . . we have arrived here without an accident, and although having used the camels every day with heavy packs, have fewer sore backs and disabled ones by far than would have been the case traveling with pack mules.

At the end of August the expedition left the fort on their survey. Beale was concerned about the dangers inherent in such a journey over such treacherous terrain, but these concerns proved unfounded in regard to the camels:



DROMEDARY FROM LOWER EGYPT, (FEMALE)—[Hesp.]



BACTRIAN CAMEL, BLANKETED, FROM CENTRAL ASIA, (MALE)—[Hesp.]

LEFT: "Dromedary from Lower Egypt (Female)" from *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of February 2, 1857, Information Respecting the Purchase of Camels for the Purposes of Military Transportations*. Washington, D.C., 1857. A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer. Library of Congress.

RIGHT: "Bactrian Camel, Blanketed, from Central Asia (Male)" from *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of February 2, 1857, Information Respecting the Purchase of Camels for the Purposes of Military Transportations*. Washington, D.C., 1857. A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer. Library of Congress.

... sometimes we forget they are with us. Certainly there never was anything so patient and enduring and so little troublesome as this noble animal. They pack their heavy load of corn, of which they never taste a grain; put up with any food offered them without complaint, and are always up with the wagons, and, withal, so perfectly docile and quiet that they are the admiration of the whole camp. . . there is not a man in camp who is not delighted with them. They are better today than they were when we left Camp Verde with them; especially since our men have learned, by experience, the best mode of packing them.

The expedition reached the Colorado River in mid-October, the last obstacle in their journey. While preparing to cross the river, Beale wrote to Floyd on October 18:

An important part of all of our operations has been acted by the camels. Without the aid of this noble and useful brute, many hardships which we have been spared would have fallen to our lot . . . At times I have thought it impossible they could stand the test to which they have been subjected; but they seem to have risen equal to every trial and to have come off of every exploration with as much strength as before starting . . . I have subjected them to trials which no other animal could possibly have endured; and yet I have arrived here, not only without the loss of a single camel, but they are admitted, by those who saw them in Texas,

to be in as good condition today as when we left San Antonio. I believe, at this time, I may speak for every man in our party when I say that there is not one of them who would not prefer the most indifferent of our camels to four of our best mules.

On October 19, as the expedition began to cross the Colorado, Beale was concerned about the camels getting across as he had been told they couldn't swim. He was pleasantly surprised when the largest camel was led to the river, plunged right in fully loaded and swam across with no difficulty. The remaining camels also crossed without incident. Their surveying mission completed, Beale led the expedition to Fort Tejon, about eighty miles north of Los Angeles, to rest and re-provision. The expedition had lasted more than three months and covered over 1,000 miles.

Floyd was extremely pleased with the results. He ordered Beale to bring the camels back to Camp Verde, but Beale demurred, giving the excuse that if the troops in California became involved in Utah the camels would prove invaluable carrying supplies. Instead, Beale moved the camels to the ranch of his business partner, Samuel A. Bishop, in the lower San Joaquin Valley. Bishop used the camels in his personal business, hauling freight to his ranch and the new town arising near Fort Tejon.

In his annual report to Congress in December 1858, Floyd enthusiastically stated: *The entire adaptation of camels to military operations on the plains may now be taken as demonstrated.* Congress, however,

was not convinced and authorized no further funding. Undeterred, Floyd pleaded his case again in his annual report in 1859:

The experiments thus far made—and they are pretty full—demonstrate that camels constitute a most useful and economic means of transportation for men and supplies through the great desert and barren portions of our interior . . . An abundant supply of these animals would enable our Army to give greater and prompter protection to our frontiers and to all our interoceanic routes than three times their cost expended in another way. As a measure of economy I can not too strongly recommend the purchase of a full supply to the consideration of Congress.

Despite the abundant evidence and sound arguments Congress wouldn't budge. Floyd tried again in 1860, but by then the clouds of civil war had Congress' undivided attention and the idea of purchasing camels was far from their minds.

The advent of the Civil War effectively halted the camel experiment. Rebel troops occupied Camp Verde in early 1861 and captured several of the remaining camels, using them to transport salt and carry mail around San Antonio. The herd near Fort Tejon, California, numbering thirty-one camels, was transferred to the Los Angeles Quartermaster Depot in mid-June 1861. During the next three years the camels were kept well-fed and continued to breed, frequently being transferred from post to post

as no one knew what else to do with them. Several recommendations to use them for mail service were proposed, but never adopted.

On February 26, 1864, the approximately thirty camels from California were sold for around \$50 each. The surviving forty-four camels from Camp Verde were finally recovered at the end of the war. On March 6, 1866, they too were put on the auction block, bringing about \$31 per camel. The Army's Quartermaster-General, MG Montgomery Meigs, approved the sale, stating his hopes that civilian enterprises might more successfully develop use of the camel and expressing his sincere regrets that the experiment had ended in failure.

The camels ended up in circuses, giving rides to children, running in "camel races," living on private ranches, or working as pack animals for miners and prospectors. They became a familiar sight in California, the Southwest, Northwest, their strange appearance often drawing crowds of curious people.

Eventually, when the curiosity wore off or their new owners simply did not want or need them anymore, many of the camels were turned loose in the wild to fend for themselves. They were seen for many years afterward, wandering the deserts and plains of the Southwest. Although never officially designated, "U.S. Army Camel Corps," this is how the Army's camel experiment has been remembered. Ignored and abandoned, it was an ignominious and unfortunate end for these noble "ships of the desert."





Hamed Erfani and Yasaman Seif. Photo by Cruz Pulido.

ADAPTING IN A NEW HOME

How Oklahoma Shaped Our Path

BY YASAMAN SEIF & HAMED ERFANI

Life does not always offer the sweetest fruit. Sometimes, you must taste the sour lemon. Yet these moments are part of what it means to be alive. They make life meaningful and reveal the importance of the people around us during difficult times and how their support helps us adjust to new situations. Over time, we learn that adaptability is not optional. It is essential. Change is constant. Without adaptability, life becomes a series of heavy, unresolved moments rather than steps on a path forward.

Adjusting to new situations has always been central to both my husband's life and mine. I am a Persian cellist from Iran and Hamed is a Persian composer, also from Iran. Our paths to music, however, were not ordinary. Unlike those who began playing instruments at a young age, neither of us studied music as undergraduates. Hamed earned his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering technology and was once a competitive soccer player. I studied graphic design and envisioned a future as an art manager in a design company. But life carried us elsewhere.

Music runs in my family, though most of them are serious music lovers rather than performers. I have always been drawn to music, especially since many of my cousins played instruments, and my father used to play the harmonica years ago. I first became interested in the violin after listening to pop music that featured it. I was quite young, but my teacher focused mainly on Iranian music, which did not appeal to me then. He was also quite short-tempered, so I eventually stopped taking lessons and gave up the violin.

My interest in the cello came later, as an undergraduate, while watching a scene in an Iranian film, *40 Years Old*. Someone was playing Bach's Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor Prelude. In that moment, I knew this was the instrument I wanted to play and devote countless hours to practicing. I felt a deep connection to its sound. It resonated with me in a

way that felt like a part of who I am, and I knew I wanted to bring that sound to life myself. On the other hand, Hamed began his musical journey on the guitar, with the goal of becoming a flamenco guitarist, but opportunities gradually led him toward music composition and production rather than performance.

Music brought us together. We met through an ensemble where Hamed was the composer and I was the cellist. Our shared love for the rich Iranian literature and poetry became a quiet force that drew us together. We used to spend hours in bookstores, buying each other books by famous and legendary Iranian poets as well as contemporary ones. We also bought CDs, each of us building a collection of the music we loved. We would spend hours every day listening to them together. As we immersed ourselves more deeply in music, we fell in love with it and slowly realized that it was not just a passion, but the work we wanted to spend our lives doing. But making that decision was terrifying. We had already invested years in other careers, and starting over in such a competitive field felt risky and uncertain. Still, we chose to move forward and face our fears. Sometimes we worried our dreams were too big as there was always another challenge to overcome, but our dreams were impossible to ignore. It felt as though we had been placed in a river and instead of resisting the current, we learned how to swim with it.

During that period, we were spending much of our income on private music lessons, balancing them alongside full-time work, academic studies, daily responsibilities, and long hours of practice. Classical music opportunities were limited in our home country, and as perfectionists, we made the difficult decision to study abroad. My instrument is rooted in the Western classical tradition, and Hamed had long dreamed of becoming a film music composer. Pursuing those goals meant leaving familiarity behind.

As Iranian musicians, we learned quickly how challenging it could be to pursue advanced music

education in the United States without undergraduate degrees in music. Admission relied entirely on strong portfolios and relentless preparation. Long working hours filled the gaps in our training. As international students, we also needed to prepare for English proficiency exams to demonstrate that we are ready to study at a higher education level in an English-speaking environment. It was a challenging and demanding journey that required a great deal of time, effort, and persistence. When we were finally accepted, the joy was paired with the hardest challenge yet: leaving our family, friends, and the life we knew, and stepping into a future filled with uncertainty.

Five years after I decided to pursue music professionally, I was accepted into a graduate program at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) in Edmond. When some of our American friends heard the news, they warned us that there was no artistic scene there and that success would be unlikely. Still, we focused on our priorities: scholarships, mentorship, and opportunities for growth. I had very little knowledge about Oklahoma before coming here. I was more familiar with my professor and my school than with the state or the city itself. I arrived here just one week after our wedding, but due to unforeseen circumstances, Hamed was unable to join me for ten months, leaving us in an unplanned long-distance marriage. The uncertainty of that period was incredibly difficult. I was already in the U.S., while Hamed was waiting to join me as soon as possible, and living in that limbo was exhausting and emotionally heavy. We checked our emails constantly, hoping for updates about Hamed's situation, and I cannot fully express how hard those months were. Though we were nearly half a world apart, we tried to stay as connected as possible. Yet, even during that painful period, we began to learn about Oklahoma and the generosity of the people who live here.

The first months were especially difficult. I struggled with homesickness, cultural adjustment, studying in a foreign language, and being separated from my husband and family. But I adapted. I acted and responded instead of retreating. I found mentors, friends, and collaborators who supported me while I was so far from my husband and family. My cello professor, Grammy-nominated Dr. Tess Remy-Schumacher, mentored me both academically and emotionally. As an international student herself, originally from Germany, she deeply understood my struggles. Her guidance, compassion, and support were invaluable during a time when everything felt fragile. Faculty and fellow students



at UCO stepped in when family could not, teaching me that adaptation also means allowing yourself to accept help and put down new roots. To feel closer to home, I often spent time with Iranian friends, listening to and playing Iranian music, or watching Iranian TV shows. Music especially plays a big role for me. It helps me reconnect with my roots and eases the feeling of homesickness, even if just for a while. But when you truly miss home, nothing quite replaces being there or seeing your loved ones again.

Another source of comfort during this time was the musical piece that brought me to the cello: Bach's Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor Prelude. I worked on it during my first semester and performed it for my jury. Whenever playing the cello started to feel overwhelming or too challenging, I would return to this piece and play or listen to it again. It reminded me, and still does, of why I fell in love with the instrument. Choosing the cello was a personal decision, not something I was pushed into as a child, and this piece brings me back to that feeling.

I have also been fortunate to experience many moments of kindness and welcome here. In Oklahoma, especially within the music community, I have consistently felt included and valued. I have been invited to perform with various ensembles and orchestras, and I was hired at the UCO School of Music shortly after my graduation. I have also been warmly welcomed into the homes of American friends. These experiences have meant a great deal to me and have helped me develop a genuine sense of belonging.

Ten months later, Hamed arrived in Oklahoma and faced his own set of challenges: a new country, a demanding program, an unfamiliar city, and the pressures of work, marriage, and high expectations. My ten months of living in Oklahoma helped him greatly when he arrived. By that time, I had already rented an apartment and built a few friendships, which made things much easier for both of us. I was also familiar with important processes, like getting a driver's license, so he was able to go through them more quickly than I did. In addition, I had already formed some connections and become familiar with the area, which helped him settle in faster and feel more comfortable in a new environment.

Hamed entered the Music Composition Program at Oklahoma City University, balancing work with intense creative demands. Dr. Edward Knight had recognized Hamed's voice and encouraged him, telling him that he had something



Hamed Erfani.

meaningful to say and only needed to find his voice and let others hear it. Despite Hamed not having an undergraduate degree in music, Dr. Knight accepted him into the program and recommended him for admission and scholarships.

We were both working extremely hard, and despite exhaustion and uncertainty, we were transforming those experiences into music. For Hamed, those challenges became ideas for composition. During his first semester, he composed a solo cello piece inspired by our difficult and unexpected separation. This was followed by an ensemble work that brought together Persian and Western instruments, featuring voice, clarinet, harp, cello, setar, oud, tar, and electronics.

When these pieces premiered, they were very well received and local musicians embraced his music. That response became a turning point, giving him the confidence and momentum to move forward and marked the beginning of his career here. Soon after, many musicians began asking him to write music for them.

Over time, adaptation shaped both of our careers. Hamed composed more than twenty works during his graduate studies and later served as Composer-in-Residence for the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra and the Oklahoma Chamber Symphony. He also served as a composition judge for The American Prize and the Symphonina Foundation, and made meaningful contributions to Oklahoma's music scene. After my graduation, I began working at the UCO School of Music, an opportunity that meant more to me than I can fully express. Being hired as an international student right after my graduation felt like a profound vote of trust. I also began teaching privately at Geib Music, working alongside the incredible Meryl and Michael Geib, and performing with local ensembles and orchestras. Each of these steps required flexibility and a willingness to embrace change.

I have also had the opportunity to mentor international students at UCO, and it has been a very meaningful experience for me. I feel a strong connection to them, and I often reflect on my own journey and the challenges I faced along the way. I usually share my experiences with them, including how I navigated difficult moments and learned to adapt to constant changes. I try to reassure them that what they are going through is normal and that things do get better with time. In many ways, I wish I had someone from the Iranian community, or another international student, to talk to when I first arrived. Since we often go through similar challenges, hearing someone else's story can be incredibly comforting and can help ease the feeling of uncertainty and isolation.

We arrived unknown and uncertain in Oklahoma, unsure whether we would be accepted. What we encountered instead was a generosity and kindness we had never anticipated. The music community in Oklahoma became our family. People introduced us, endorsed our work, and opened doors we never knew existed. When we shared stories of this support with our family and friends back home, they were often astonished. That was when we realized how important it is to tell this story and share the opportunities that exist here.

Our experience shows that adaptation is not simply reacting to circumstances, but actively shaping one's path. Success is not defined by geography, but by the people and communities that surround you. Oklahoma taught us resilience, openness, and the power of community. Through adaptation, we did not merely survive. We grew. This lesson lives on in every piece of music we write, every performance we give, and every student we teach. Adaptation is action. It is growth. It is learning to see possibility in change.

Playing music is very much a constant process of adapting. Every time you pick up an instrument, things are slightly different. The



strings feel different under your fingers, your body feels different, the room sounds different, and the people you are playing with bring their own energy and interpretation. You are always adjusting, whether it is to the tuning, the response of the instrument, the acoustics of the space, or the musicians around you. Even your own emotions and state of mind change from day to day, and that affects how you play. The same is very true for composing. Each piece is shaped by new ideas, experiences, and limitations. You adapt to what the music asks for, to the instruments you are writing for, and to the context in which the piece will exist.

In many ways, music is never fixed. It is, like us, always alive, always changing. As musicians, as humans, we must constantly listen, respond, and adapt.

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- Listen to arrangements and performances by Erfani and Seif, as well as an original composition by Erfani.

bit.ly/4eWqA8P | bit.ly/4xWuOWt | bit.ly/4gNkJF9

HAMED ERFANI is an Iranian composer, producer, and audio engineer. He holds a Master of Music in Composition from Oklahoma City University and serves as a composition judge for The American Prize and the Symphonina Foundation, as well as Assistant Coordinator of Artist-First Initiatives at the Leyenda Foundation. A former Composer-in-Residence for the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra, he currently serves as Composer-in-Residence for the Oklahoma Chamber Symphony and is a member of the Composers Diversity Collective and the American Federation of Musicians.

YASAMAN SEIF is a cellist, educator, musicians' health researcher, and coach. She holds a master's degree in cello performance from the University of Central Oklahoma. Seif is a member of the American String Teachers Association and the American Federation of Musicians, and she presented at the 2024 ASTA National Conference. Her writing and interviews have appeared in *The Strad*, *ASTA Journal*, *Shoutout Social*, *I Care if You Listen*, and *Oklahoma Music*. As a performer, she has collaborated with the Enid Symphony Orchestra, Oklahoma Chamber Symphony, Oklahoma Composers Orchestra, and Oklahoma Metropolitan Orchestra.

Adapt or *Eschew*?

New limitations on the teaching of
United States history imperil our present
and jeopardize our future

BY HANNIBAL B. JOHNSON



The Star-Spangled Banner captivates children at
the National Museum of American History (NMAH).
NMAH, Smithsonian Institution, 2026.

The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.

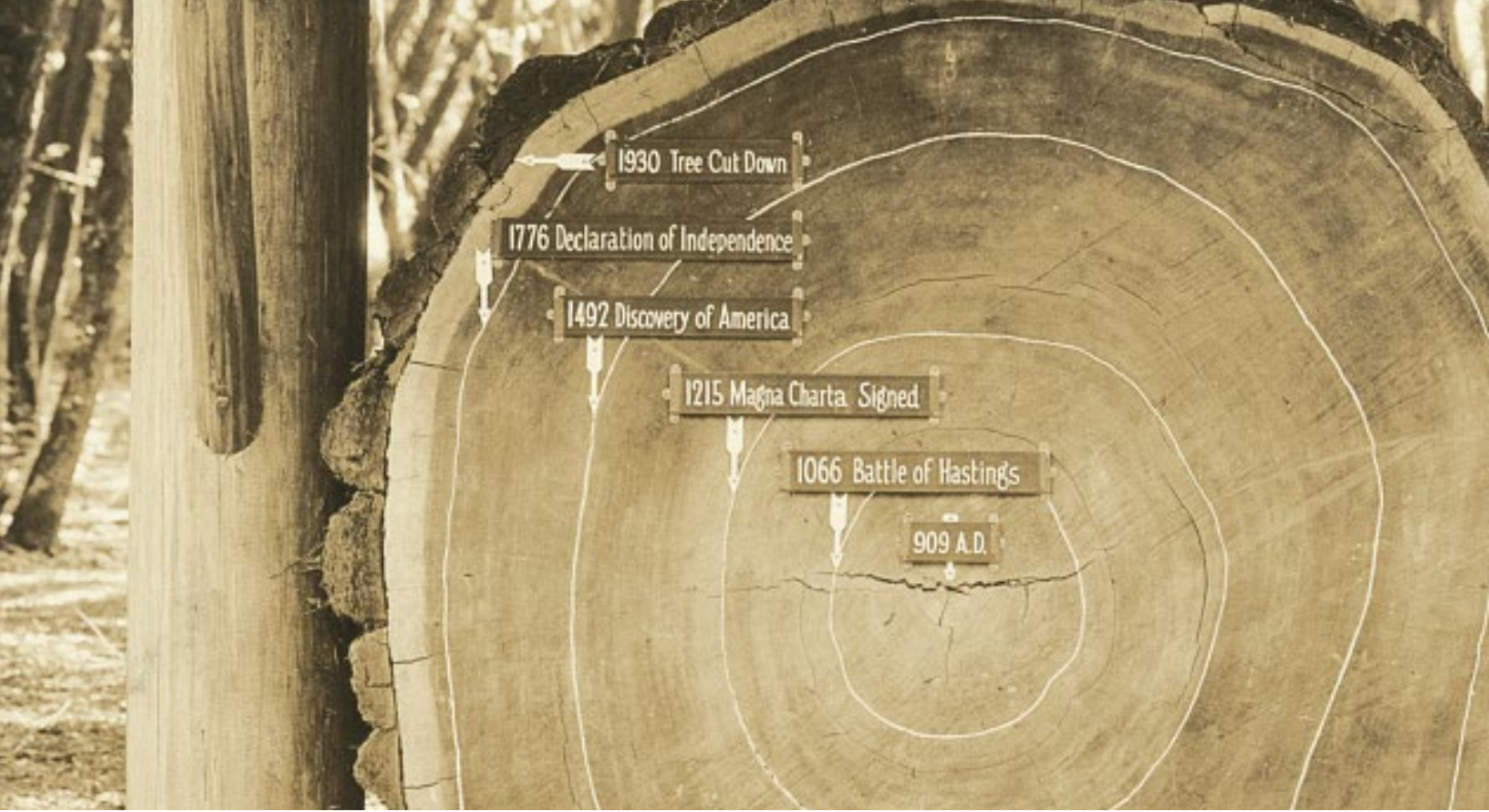
—William Arthur Ward

Reflections on change often suggest adaptation is key to life mastery. The ability to mold behavior for situational alignment ranks among coveted skills. Personal relationships, financial situations, and other life obstacles often require us to adapt. But adaptation for its own sake is folly and may even prove fatal.

We currently face a transgenerational adaptative challenge. Lawmakers throughout the nation are asking us—and teachers in particular—to adapt to changed criteria around the teaching of United States history. These new limitations imperil our present and jeopardize our future. We are being asked—directed, in some instances—to adapt to a particular version of American history, a more traditional historical gaze that minimizes cruel and ugly moments in our past to limit discomfort and enhance national patriotism. But adapting would mean abandoning a decades-long push for a more complex, comprehensive, inclusive truth-telling with respect to our national narrative.

We would be wise to begin this and any consideration of adaptation with inquiry. Why are lawmakers asking us to change criteria? Whose interests are likely to be served thereby? What consequences might flow from such a transition? The answers to these critical questions may reveal whether we should *adapt* and adopt these new criteria, or, at the opposite end of the responsive spectrum, *eschew* and sideline them.

United States history, as traditionally taught, too often offered a sanitized, monochromatic version of actors and events. It leant heavily toward a hagiographic, Eurocentric perspective, diminishing and overlooking narratives that center people of color and other marginalized communities. Over time, and as we have evolved as a nation, our historical gaze has expanded to include more of the contributions of the diverse people who shaped America. History did not change. What changed was our interpretation of United States history. What changed was our increasing dissatisfaction with a one-dimensional false narrative. What changed was our commitment to truth-telling—to knowing and sharing an inclusive, representative version of our past.



Installed in Muir Woods National Monument shortly after the redwood fell in 1930, this cross-section timeline highlighted Eurocentric events. Today, the timeline is more inclusive and diverse. It includes the construction of cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde in 1100, the building of Tenochtitlan by the Aztecs beginning in 1325, and the establishment of Jamestown by English *colonists* in 1607. In the current iteration, America is not discovered in 1492. Instead, Columbus “sails” to it. The tree rings have not changed since 1930, but how we tell history has.

TOP: Muir Woods National Monument, California. Library of Congress. RIGHT: Muir Woods, 2012. The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith’s America Project, Library of Congress.



One simple example may be drawn from the history surrounding the 1921 calamity that destroyed Black Wall Street, the famed Black entrepreneurial sector and surrounding residential community in Tulsa, Oklahoma. For decades, journalists and historians labeled the event the 1921 Tulsa Race *Riot*. As the centennial of the event neared and as attention to it surged, community members rallied to reclaim and rename it, opting for the label 1921 Tulsa Race *Massacre*. The words riot and massacre reference the same set of facts, but reflect a different, evolving interpretation of the meaning of those facts. Many Black Tulsans (and others) felt that “massacre” better described the onslaught and utter devastation of the Black community than “riot,” a term journalists and thought leaders commonly attached to civil unrest involving racial conflict in the twentieth century, irrespective of culpability, scope, and scale.

Recent local, state, and national initiatives target this trend toward a more inclusive, nuanced approach to history. Such measures seek to control the historical narrative and rid schools, national parks, museums, and other centers of public engagement and discourse of content deemed overly solicitous of minority and marginalized voices. History that examines “divisive concepts” such as race, gender, and sexuality—key aspects of our humanity—is discouraged, presumably on the theory that sugarcoating or ignoring past and present divisions will make them magically disappear.

At the state level, for example, Oklahoma House Bill 1775, enacted into law in 2021, prohibits, among other things, lesson plans or training that would make anyone “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” Together with its other elements, the law creates a chilling effect on teachers, placing them in the unenviable position of choosing between teaching an accurate history, some of which is undeniably “hard,” and adhering to the law.

Resistance to House Bill 1775 came swiftly. In October 2021, the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the law on constitutional grounds, claiming violations of the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The case is pending, though a federal court issued a partial preliminary injunction in 2024 which blunts implementation of parts of the law. In October 2022, both the Osage Nation and the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Tribes called for the repeal of House Bill 1775. Repeal legislation later introduced in January 2023 failed.

In addition, Oklahoma Senate Bill 796, passed in 2025, bans institutions of higher education from using state funds for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and positions, making permanent restrictions imposed previously via Executive Order of Governor Kevin Stitt. The practical effect of the measure is to tamp down efforts to highlight and ameliorate historical disparities and inequities, including those found in teaching and curriculum.

At the federal level, actions of the National Park Service (NPS) illustrate this push to prettify our history. Executive Order No. 14253, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” issued in 2025, authorized the purge of content that might “inappropriately disparage Americans past or living.” Pursuant to the Order, federal agencies began reviewing interpretive materials, ostensibly to ensure accuracy and honesty, while prohibiting “expenditure on exhibits or programs that degrade shared American values.” The words “accuracy” and “honesty” need little explanation. “Shared American values,” though, begs the questions: Shared by whom? According to whom? Which “American” values?

In response, NPS removed artwork and informational displays referencing slavery from the President’s House Site, part of the Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. The agency ordered the famous, deeply disturbing photograph, known as “The Scourged Back,” a jarring 1863

image captured at the height of the Civil War depicting the horrifically scarred back of a formerly enslaved Black man, to be removed from Fort Pulaski National Monument. NPS also weakened the interpretation of Native and women's history at Muir Woods and LGBTQ+ narratives at the Stonewall National Monument.

We seemingly face a binary choice: embrace a utopian and exceptionalist view of the past, a sort of highlights reel, or reject that curated narrative and rally around a telling of our history that is more of a searching investigation, a critical thinking exercise, taking a panoramic view of the past and then asking: *What?* (i.e., looking at the people, places, facts, and circumstances); *So what?* (i.e., delving into the meaning of the past and its present and future relevance); and *Now what?* (i.e., considering ways to leverage the past in service of meaningful goals and aspirations). By commission or omission, we will either be agents of the efforts to sanitize our history or resisters to it.

A growing number of organizations and individuals are choosing resistance—choosing to eschew rather than adapt. As previously noted, NPS removed exhibits from the President's House Site in Philadelphia in January 2026, nearly nine months after the issuance of a presidential executive order. The exhibits at the one-time home of Presidents George Washington and John Adams included displays about nine enslaved people who once lived there. In a show of solidarity and resistance, local citizens put up handmade signs advocating for telling Black history. Amicus briefs in support of the City of Philadelphia's lawsuit seeking restoration accused President Trump of attempting to "rewrite and whitewash" history. The Avenging The Ancestors Coalition, an organization of African American historians and activists, helped lead the successful effort to restore slavery exhibit signage weeks later.

Another example of people eschewing, rather than adapting to, circumstances, involves the same presidential executive order at issue in the matter of the President's House Site in Philadelphia. That mandate instructed NPS staff to review signage and educational materials at all national parks and censor information deemed to "disparage Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times)" or emphasize matters unrelated to the "achievements and progress of the American people or, with respect to natural features, the beauty, abundance, and grandeur of the American landscape." The order compelled NPS staff to flag materials deemed "out of compliance," which included exhibits about topics such as slavery, discrimination, the Civil Rights Movement, harm to Indigenous peoples, climate change, and pollution. As interpreted, the order required park rangers to discard valuable signs and educational materials created after years of historical scholarship and scientific research.

In February 2026, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), together with a coalition of scientists, historians, and advocates, sued to halt this effort to erase history and censor science in America's national parks. The matter is pending.

Ordinary people are resisting, with some notable successes, efforts to control the historical narrative—efforts that not only contradict the current models of teaching American history, but also American public opinion. Most Americans deem it important to have public discussions about the country's historical successes as well as its failures, according to a November 2025 Pew Research Center survey. Sixty-six percent of survey respondents said it is important to have discussions about our nation's failures and flaws. A 2021 American Historical Association survey found that 84% of respondents felt

Should American history have gatekeepers? That is the question being argued, and in some cases, answered, in courts and communities across the country.

Fort Pulaski National Monument in Savannah, Georgia, ca. 1980. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.





People protested the decision to remove the slavery exhibition at the President's House by taping handwritten signs reading "learn ALL history." Photograph courtesy of Mark Eichmann/WHYY.

history is as important to learn as business or engineering. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that it is acceptable to teach history about the harm done to others, even if such an approach creates discomfort for learners. Americans prioritize inclusive history.

Americans want a history grounded in truth—in facts, data, and experiences. They recognize history for all of what it is: pain, suffering, and struggle, as well as achievement, celebration, and triumph. Our glory and greatness derive not from our purity and perfection, but rather from our movement toward ideals, though imperfect, imprecise, and incomplete. We can recognize and discuss our “hard history” while simultaneously embracing and elevating our golden moments.

When we sanitize history, we erase people: their lives and their experiences; their traumas and their triumphs; their belonging and their being. In essence, we say to them, “You do not matter.” The price of simply going along to get along, of teaching a history

that pretends perfection, is generations of students who will fail to grasp the complexities of human relationships, the dynamics of power and privilege, and the beguiling aspirational lure of America.

We can only bind wounds and build bridges when we see one another—when we truly see one another. History is a tapestry, not a monochromatic canvas. Groups can and should maintain their individual integrity and narrative, but in the context and under the umbrella of a shared experiential reality and, more importantly, our shared humanity. Then, the American story becomes a people’s history of the United States. It honors our identities and celebrates our common aspirations. How and what we learn from those narratives enable us to craft an America closer to the *e pluribus unum* motto we have so long embraced, if not fully embodied.

As we mark the 250th anniversary of American independence, we face a choice. Do we accede to the demands of those who would have us present idyllic annals or do we resist these pressures in service of a history centered



The President's House in Philadelphia. National Park Service.

on truth and inclusion; a history focused more on living up to democratic ideals than propagandizing for a democracy that exists only in fantasy?

At its best, history can thrust us along the continuing march toward the lofty aspirations of our founding covenants. That journey requires us to *eschew*, rather than *adapt* to, a model of teaching history that removes fractures and wounds in favor of one that elevates truth, learning, and growth. Only by considering our comprehensive, complex history can we appreciate the full measure of how far we have come. It is our ability and willingness to look back that propels us forward.

HANNIBAL B. JOHNSON, a Harvard Law School graduate, is an author, attorney, consultant, and college professor. He serves on the federal 400 Years of African American History Commission and chaired the Education Committee for the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission. Many of his books chronicle the Black experience in Oklahoma and its indelible impact on American history. Johnson received lifetime achievement awards from the Oklahoma Center for the Book and Leadership Oklahoma and has been inducted into the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame, the Tulsa Hall of Fame, and the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

According to recent surveys, most Americans agree that it is important to tell all of American history, even the difficult chapters. Anything else is incomplete.

This essay discusses current events, still unfolding, as they stood in the late spring of 2026. New developments are likely.



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FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Sarah Milligan, Chair

I'm delighted to share an update from the Oklahoma Humanities Board of Trustees as we move into a new era of organizational and cultural identity. After the abrupt and illegal withholding of legislatively-appropriated funding in April 2025, we enacted the once-theoretical emergency plan of shutdown that had been a piece of our organizational health check for years. Following an initial six months of divestment, we began assessing the organization's future and possible evolution. We evaluated our role in communities and organizations across the state and knew that if we did not exist, there would be a resounding void of not just financial resources, but promotional, connective, and informational resources for humanities-centered content and community across the state.

While we have had many moments of uncertainty and existential reflection, I am grateful to say that thanks to the efforts of our Board, friends, supporters, and our executive director, we not only continue to exist, but are moving toward a future bright with possibilities. We will continue to be an organization that you can rely on for sparking curiosity, connecting stories, fostering empathy, and connecting people across time, place, and worldviews. We are thankful for your support throughout this process.

As I complete my final months as Board chair, I also want to express my gratitude for the efforts and the heart given by the organization's former staff. We are who we are because you have given so much of your professional expertise and care to the communities we serve. I also want to recognize Caroline, our executive director, for her compassionate and stalwart leadership throughout this period. She is the primary reason we can look forward with optimism. And to my fellow Board members, current and past, your unwavering support of staff, organizational mission, and each other in this tumultuous period has been a source of hope.

I look to the near and distant future with anticipation for the vision we are currently building and will continue to realize. As we move towards greater organizational independence and sustainability, I invite you all to *adapt* with us.

THANK YOU

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