

***Painting A New Battle Tipi* [DVD]. Daniel C. Swan, James M. McCarty and Michael P. Jordan, Producers. Norman, OK: Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History with the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society, 2009. 13 min.\***

Reviewed by Clyde Ellis

The Black Leggings Warrior Society has a long and venerated history as one of the Kiowa tribe's most important organizations. Originally formed in the 19th century “to protect our people,” as current commander Lyndreth “Tugger” Palmer puts it in this brilliant documentary, the society—called *Tonkongya* by the Kiowas—is widely admired for its steadfast devotion to honoring those who defended the tribe in the 19th century, as well as those who have served in the armed forces during the 20th and 21st centuries. Like all such societies, the Black Leggings experienced a difficult period in the early 20th century when the federal government’s forced assimilation programs attempted to destroy the relevance and importance of warrior societies by disrupting or banning their rituals and practices. Despite these assaults, the society continued to meet until 1928, when a combination of circumstances finally forced it to disband. Service in the Second World War, however, prompted a number of Kiowa veterans, led by Gus Palmer, Sr. (Tugger’s father), to revive the Black Leggings in 1958 in honor of “the modern fighters” whose service and sacrifice reflected the time-honored values associated with the society’s history.

At the biannual encampment and ceremonies that mark the society’s continuing importance in Kiowa life, one of the most distinctive and admired icons is the Black Leggings’ battle tipi. This brief but compelling film documents the decision to make and paint a new tipi to commemorate the society’s 50th anniversary of its 1958 revival. This is the 3rd such tipi to be painted in the last 50 years, and like its predecessors, its designs reveal much about the extraordinary power of memory and history in the community. Moreover, the story of its creation is a stunningly effective example of the continuing vitality of both traditional and contemporary Kiowa values. In making this film, the Black Leggings Society and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History clearly illustrate one way through which the Kiowa people have negotiated the often-difficult demands of maintaining tribal ways in modern America.

The first battle tipi was based on a design given to the Kiowa leader Dohausan in 1845 by the neighboring Cheyennes, who transferred the tipi’s distinctive horizontal black and yellow stripe motif to the society as part of a wedding gift. Those stripes, said to represent the war trails on which Kiowa men traveled in the 19th century, remain prominently displayed on one half of the tipi to this day, and are a clear statement about the continuing importance of the tipi’s history and legacy. The battle tipi has also historically been decorated with battle images, a fact that made it “the best known and most admired Kiowa tipi.” But because the tipi is also a representation of lived experience, and not simply a relic of a hallowed past, its battle scenes have also included scenes from contemporary conflicts such as World War II. Not surprisingly, when Sherman Chaddlesone and Jeff Yellowhair designed the new tipi, they included battle pictures from six major theaters of the contemporary period: both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and

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Afghanistan. The regimental crests of units in which Kiowas have served are also represented, and down the center of the tipi's back are the names of Kiowas who have been killed in combat. As Tugger Palmer put it, "men and women in uniform...are very, very honorable, and they should be honored because this is our way, our Indian way, our own humble Indian way. And these are the true warriors of our people, the Kiowa tribe....they're the protectors, not only of our people, but the people of the United States."

This documentary is a moving and profoundly interesting commentary on a number of levels. It clearly demonstrates, for example, the continuing vitality of Kiowa traditions generally, and of the Black Leggings specifically, by deftly examining how service in the American military became associated with tribal traditions of honor and sacrifice. In doing so, this film not only introduces us to a little-known aspect of Kiowa life, it also asks viewers to examine for themselves what it means to be a Native person, a military veteran, and an American citizen. The film also reveals a strongly collaborative and mutually respectful relationship between the Black Leggings Society and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma. Working together, the museum and the Black Leggings members have created a film that does much to celebrate not only the survival and continued importance of the battle tipi, but also the creation of a relationship between the museum and Native people that can only improve our understanding of, and appreciation for, the complexities of contemporary Indian life.

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