

TONKAWA TRIBE OF OKLAHOMA

Tribal Headquarters: Tonkawa, OK



A brief history

The Tonkawa are members of the distinctive Tonkawan linguistic family. The word “Tonkawa” means “the people of the wolf,” a revered animal which they would never kill. The Tribe originated in the southern plains of western Oklahoma, to south central Texas and eastern New Mexico. They were known as great warriors from their conflicts with other Plains tribes, the Spanish and American settlers.

As a nomadic tribe that lived in tipis, the Tonkawa hunted buffalo and deer with bows and arrows and spears. They later hunted with rifles traded from the Spanish. In the 18th century they became skilled riders and breeders of horses. The Tonkawa were generally friendly towards Texas and aligned themselves with Lipan Apache. By 1837, drifting more and more towards the southwest frontier of Texas, they became associated with tribes in Mexican territory.

They were taken by railroad from Fort Griffin, Texas to Indian Territory in 1884. With a winter stopover in Stroud they reached the Ponca Agency on June 29, 1885. The next day they reached “Oakland.” Since then the tribe has celebrated its annual Powwow on June 30. The tribe organized its government under the Oklahoma Welfare Act in 1938. The tribe has more than 440 members.

About the flag

The flag of the Tonkawa Tribe features their tribal seal in the center of a royal blue field. Twelve stars divided into two sets represent the 12 clans of the Tonkawa tribe. In the background of the seal is a red earth topped with a rising sun. The earth represents “La Tortuga” (turtle) the sacred place of the Tonkawa’s birth. The sun symbolizes the rebirth of the Tonkawa people.

In front is a pink and blue water bird, symbolizing the counter-forces of the world. The bird is pointing upward signifying the direction of the rising spirit and flesh. Just above the bird is a crimson crescent open towards the bottom, representing the sacred alter of the church. Just behind the bird towards the bottom of the seal is a pipe symbolizing the spiritual connectedness to the Creator as well as deliverance from the mothers’ womb.

Educational Activity

Using your library, find Donald Healy and Peter Orinski’s book *Native Flags*. Research the Tonkawa flag. What do the symbols on the flag mean?