

FROM THIS CORNER

By

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### THE GREAT SEAL OF THE EASTERN SHAWNEE NATION

Five simple objects—a circle, one panther, a spear, one swan and a collection of four feathers—comprise the elements depicted in The Great Seal of the Eastern Shawnee Nation. The emblems are simplistic in nature but complex in meaning. The circle with its vibrant blue coloring is continuous, never-ending, meaning no beginning, no ending but one world, one universe, one tribe of people. The round shape encircles and holds together all other objects, just as the tribe holds all members together as one.

The circle or universe is divided into two equal parts by a spear or lance with two feathers trailing downward near the tip of the spear. That spear with its two feathers symbolizes the resolve of tribal members to protect our dual universe and citizenship comprised of the United States of America and the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. That spear means we will fight to our death to defend this very universe that we hold as sacred.

A large elongated black panther dominates the top half of the seal. This panther, seemingly stretched out in motion, represents strength, courage and prowess in battle.

Below the spear in contrast to the powerful black panther above rests a serene white swan. The symbolism of the two animals contrasts as much as the black and white colors contrast. The swan with the signature curvature of its long neck looks down in tranquility, representative of grace and dignity.

Four hanging eagle feathers at the bottom of the circle or universe complete the logo. Four is a number that frequently appears in Native American symbolism. The four feathers bring to mind the four elements of the earth, the four winds, the four directions or corners of the earth. And of course the feathers are eagle feathers. The eagle is the most highly revered species indicative of courage, spirit, strength and bravery. Additionally the eagle symbolizes power from a lofty position, meaning the eagle is the one closest to the Creator.

The above description is the explanation given today about the meaning of our logo or seal that appears on our tribal flag and other tribal entities. But wait. There's more to this story that needs to be told. Just as the flag of the United States has changed throughout history, so has the great seal of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe. Ask Robert Alexander, designer and creator of the original Eastern Shawnee seal.

The year was 1976, the Chief was Jim Greenfeather, and the occasion was the Bicentennial of the United States. Robert Alexander served as Business Manager of four Ottawa County tribes seeking complete restoration of federal recognition. The Ottawas, Peorias, and Modocs had been terminated but thanks

to owning a historic cemetery in Kansas City, the Wyandottes were only partially terminated. An Inter-Tribal Council (ITC) comprised of Indian leaders from tribes within the boundaries of the Miami Agency had been formed in 1967 and although the terminated tribes could not vote, they could attend and participate in discussion. In the year preceding the Bicentennial Year of 1976, the discussion at ITC was obtaining an Indian Grant to design and construct tribal flags to participate in the Bicentennial Celebrations. The grant was obtained and Chief Greenfeather enlisted the aid of Robert Alexander for the design of the Eastern Shawnee tribal seal or logo. The research conducted by Alexander and Greenfeather was also used as the basis of a play entitled *The Panther and the Swan*, written by Clark Frayser and George Phelps. This play was first performed at the Quapaw Tribal Grounds in August of the Bicentennial Year 1976. Alexander's design mirrored the content of that play and the original logo design is the same used today with one exception: initially there were five eagle feathers, not four.

Why did Alexander choose five eagle feathers and how did it happen that the five feathers were reduced to four? Alexander used five eagle feathers to depict Shawnee history, not Native American symbolism. Prior to being two separate and then three separate and distinct federally recognized Shawnee tribes, prior to being relocated to Oklahoma, the Shawnee Nation was one nation with five septs. Those septs were the Kispoko, Chalahgawtha, Thawegila, Mecoches, and Peckuwe (numerous variations of spellings). The Eastern Shawnee seal had those five septs represented by five eagle feathers from 1976 until sometime in the early 1990's. Along comes the world of easy duplication, then known as Xeroxing. Perhaps the history, pronunciations and spellings of the five septs were too complicated. Perhaps the five feathers weren't perfectly balanced. Perhaps someone liked the Native American symbolism of the number four. Who knows? (Well at least one person knows.) At any rate sometime in the early 90's enters a xerox thief who covered up one of the feathers, forever changing the seal or logo to four feathers.

The change in the logo did not go unnoticed. In fact throughout the years the seal has sparked several lively discussions. Some say two fish, not two feathers, hang from the staff. Other individuals maintain the two animals on the seal represent William Henry Harrison and Tecumseh, with the black panther symbolizing the evil of Harrison and the white swan representing the purity of Tecumseh. Yet others state the panther refers to Tecumseh, recalling the night of Tecumseh's birth when a comet, meteor shower or shooting star streaked across the sky, symbolizing in the Native World that a great leader was being born. Some individuals lobbied for returning the seal to its original five feathers, but by this time folding chairs, stationery, stained glass replicas, shirts, cups and other numerous items depicted the four feathered seal. Because those numerous replicas were in existence and because the design was less than 20 years old as opposed to 200 or 300 years in age, the decision was made to leave the seal with four feathers.

Knowing all these details, reflecting upon the various interpretations does not diminish the significance of the great seal of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. Instead they add richness and preserve our diverse tribal history much like the various flags of the United States tell the evolving story of our Mother Country. As has been said, "We carry the burden of stories that need to be told."

(Research for this article comes from a 2009 interview with Robert Alexander and personal knowledge.)