# Women
# OF OKLAHOMA

Women have been categorized as many things throughout history, from simple categorizations such as wife, mother, and sister, to the increasingly independent titles of activist, businesswoman, and partner. The list goes on. Such could not have been achieved without the tireless efforts of countless female pioneers, women who have helped change perceptions and shift gender norms in Oklahoma over time.

Evidence suggests a female presence in what is now Oklahoma as early as the pre-Columbian settlements at Spiro Mounds in the eastern portions of the state. Female ascribed tools, pottery, and textiles have been unearthed through archaeological study. Later women came to the land either as members of roaming Indian tribes or as the wives of explorers and traders traveling west. Yet the most notable growth in the female population of early Oklahoma lands occurred as Indian women came to Indian Territory as refugees, pushed west by eastern Indian removals. These early women held important roles in both the home and the fields, in raising children and cultivating crops, while also serving to further acculturation across different tribes and groups in the area.

As time progressed, other women would join them in the state as pioneers, missionaries, and teachers. Before the Civil War, as many as two hundred, mostly young, women were working in schools or the church in Indian Territory. Nevertheless, one group not often regarded is that of the women who were brought to Oklahoma as slaves. Some were able to intermarry with different tribal members and gain more freedoms; others lived under strict rule either working the land or sharing homemaking duties, paralleling the practices of the slaveholding Deep South. Following the Civil War, as demographics changed across the Territory, the spaces that these different women occupied shifted as well.

The image most synonymous with Oklahoma history in many people's minds is that of the pioneer woman living on a homestead. Women such as these came to Oklahoma, both with their families and on their own, following pressure to open up Indian Territory to white settlement in the 1880s. If single and over the age of twenty-one, a woman was allowed to claim her own plot, a first chance for many women to own land for themselves. Alongside those that came before them, the women of the Territory often brought cultural contributions to their communities through work in schools, churches, charities, and the arts. Whether they participated in land runs or were brought as slaves, women contributed to Oklahoma life and society a great deal.

The traditional roles that women held in the home and in their communities began to shift following statehood and during World War I. Slowly, women entered the workforce in greater numbers as louder calls began for reform movements and equal rights. Since then, women have played an active role in everything from civil rights to cultivating business to organizing artistic and scientific pursuits and have helped to change the cultural perception Oklahoma as a "backward" or "country" state. The women of Oklahoma, a diverse group representing a multitude of cultures, classes, and values over time, have consistently adapted to new state pressures and norms. The women represented in this exhibit are but a few of the many who, through their accomplishments, sacrifices, and hard work, have forever helped shape the state of Oklahoma.