

# The Tepee with Battle Pictures

*A gift made to a Kiowa chief lives on, a century and a half later*

by Candace S. Greene

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Kiowa, lured by the horses that could be acquired from the Spaniards, moved from their homeland at the headwaters of the Yellowstone to the southern Plains. Horses changed buffalo hunting from a means of subsistence to a source of plenty and helped transport the resultant wealth. With the new way of life, a tribe needed firearms to defend its hunting territory from competing groups. Initially, the major sources of firearms, ammunition, and weapons repair were the trading posts located on the Missouri River system, far to the north and east. But in 1833-34, Charles Bent established a trading post in eastern Colorado, in territory controlled by the Cheyenne and Arapaho. For some years, the Kiowa and their Comanche allies battled the southern bands of Cheyenne and their Arapaho allies for free access to the post. Finally, in 1840, the tribes agreed to a lasting peace and alliance. Little Bluff, principal chief of the Kiowa, negotiated the peace with High Backed Wolf, a prominent Cheyenne chief.

Five years later, Little Bluff and the Cheyenne chief Sleeping Bear, who had become his partner in a formal pact of friendship and mutual support, commemorated the continuing peace between the two tribes. Sleeping Bear presented his friend with a fine painted tepee. In accepting this special gift, Little Bluff presented Sleeping Bear with a number of horses, including a highly valued, black-eared racing mount.

Among the Kiowa, as among the Cheyenne, painted tepees were objects of considerable prestige. Less than 20 percent of tepees were painted; the rest were

*A painting on buckskin shows the Kiowa camp surrounding the center pole erected for the Medicine Lodge. Recognizable by its stripes, the Tepee with Battle Pictures is the second one south of the camp opening. Executed at the turn of the century by Silverhorn, a grandnephew of the Kiowa chief Little Bluff, the painting was part of a series commissioned by ethnologist James Mooney to portray phases of the traditional Medicine Lodge ceremony.*

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution







of plain buffalo hide. An ordinary tepee belonged to the women of the household, but individual men owned the painted ones. Most tepee designs were spiritual in origin, inspired by a man's vision, dream, or other encounter with the supernatural. Sometimes, however, a man captured a tepee from an enemy tribe or received one as a gift from an ally. Whatever its origin, a painted tepee could be passed on to other members of a family (by blood or marriage), and a design might persist for decades. At the time he received the tepee

from Sleeping Bear, Little Bluff already owned a painted tepee known as the Yellow Tepee, which he had inherited from his father.

Sixteen horizontal yellow stripes boldly adorned one-half of the new tepee, sweeping around from the center back to the front, where the sides of the cover joined. They represented successful Cheyenne war expeditions. The other half was devoted to scenes of warfare, a novelty for the Kiowa, who painted battle scenes on hide robes and calendar records, but not on

tepees. As a result, the Kiowa named the tepee *Do-giagya-guat*, Tepee with Battle Pictures. Because tepees stood with the doorway facing east to greet the rising sun (and the back to the west, braced against the prevailing winds), the half with the battle pictures was known as the north side and that with the stripes as the south side.

Little Bluff soon added his own embellishments to the tepee. Between the yellow stripes he inserted fifteen black stripes, for successful war parties he had led. Down the back on the north side, he added

twenty tomahawks. These represented the coups, or deeds of war, that the prominent warrior Heart Eater had achieved with that weapon in combat with Pawnee enemies. Above the front doorway, a row of eight feathered lances symbolized the coups Sitting on a Tree had compiled with that weapon. A picture of a warrior encircled by enemies decorated the top on the north side. The story of this deed was contributed by Feathered Head Pendant, a Comanche ally of the Kiowa who, surrounded by Mexican troops in about 1830,

Chief Little Bluff, below, painted by George Catlin in 1834, received the Tepee with Battle Pictures in 1845. The rights to its design subsequently remained in his family. With actors Ester LaBarr and White Parker, left, a version of the tepee appeared in the 1917 silent film *Daughter of the Dawn*.

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.



had defended himself all day behind a breastwork hastily scooped out of the sand, eventually escaping after killing one of the soldiers.

Buffalo-hide tepees rarely lasted more than one year in regular use. They became smoke- and weather-stained and rotted around the bottom where they were staked to the ground. Poor people might get by with cutting off the bottom and making do for another year with a smaller tepee, but a prestigious dwelling demanded regular renewal. A tepee required about twelve freshly tanned buffalo hides and twenty-two poles. The Tepee with Battle Pictures was a little larger than most, requiring perhaps two more hides. Men killed the buf-

falo to secure new hides, while women tanned the hides and cut and sewed them to make the tepee cover. The men then did the painting.

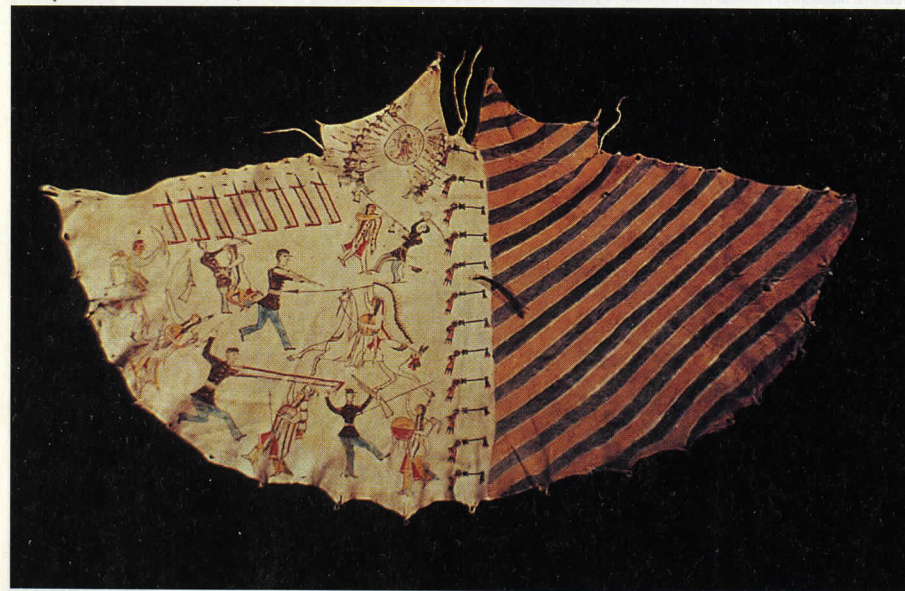
Summer was the ideal time for tepee renewal because the hair on hides secured in this season was more easily removed. Also in summer, the Kiowa left their dispersed hunting camps and came together in larger groups, culminating in the great tribal gathering at which the Medicine Lodge ceremony was held. This assembly allowed for wide participation in the painting of the cover and provided an appreciative audience for display of the beautiful new tepee.

Little Bluff would invite as many as



A scale model of the tepee cover, below, was commissioned for exhibition by James Mooney. Hunting Horse, right, played a supporting role in *Daughter of the Dawn*. The tepee in the film was painted by Charley Buffalo, a grandnephew of Chief Little Bluff.

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution



twenty to thirty men to participate in the renewal of the Tepee with Battle Pictures. They would discuss what events were worthy of depiction and would agree on two or three dozen. While the black and yellow stripes and the rows of tomahawks and lances were permanent features, other scenes might change. The space at the top was reserved for a "circle picture," a valiant stand in which a warrior surrounded by enemies eventually made his escape. In time, the Comanche picture gave way to one depicting the famous Kiowa warrior Big Bow with his wife Black Bear (who often accompanied him on war expeditions), surrounded by Mexican troops. Later the honor went to Yellow Wolf, encircled by Osage enemies.

A man's deeds were not included without his permission, since he owned the story of his accomplishments and their representation. But few would decline such an honor. The actual painting of the scene might be done by the hero of the event, by the owner of the tepee, or by any competent artist working under direction.

Intangible property played a significant role in Kiowa life. In addition to tales of military exploits, individuals owned the rights to their creative products. A man would not sing a song another had composed without permission. The same prin-

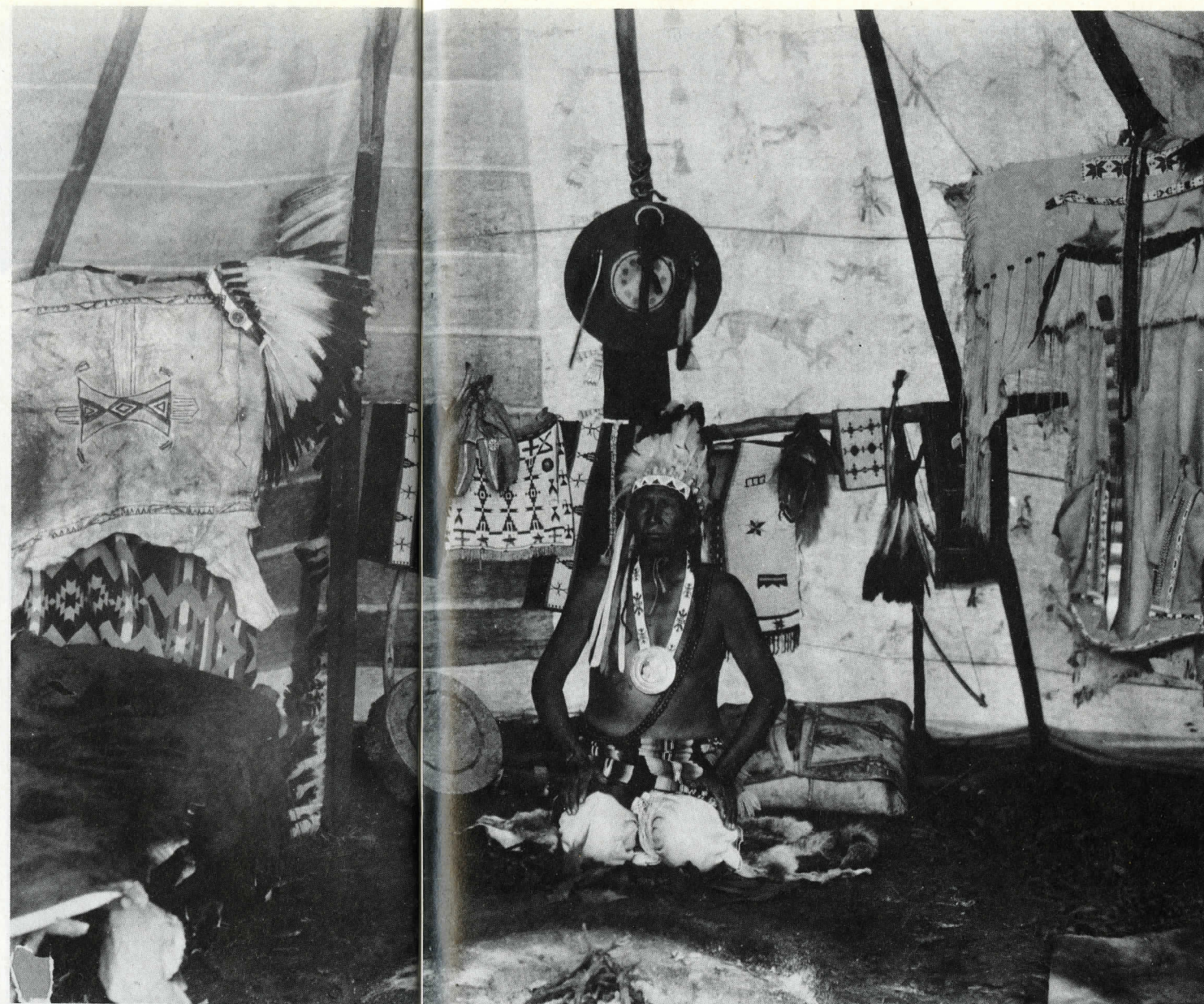
ciple applied to a woman's beadwork designs. While a woman might present a pair of beaded moccasins to another person as a gift, this did not give the recipient the right to copy the design. Formal names, as distinct from common nicknames, were among the most valued items of property. Distinguished names usually circulated within a family, their bestowal being a mark of honor.

Although Plains Indians were not the only tribes that recognized nonmaterial, high-status goods, such weightless baggage was ideally suited to their nomadic life style. If property was destroyed by fire, as the Tepee with Battle Pictures was in 1872, or in the course of warfare, the loss was a temporary one. The rights to the design, the real source of the tepee's value, endured. Even if a tepee was not made for a period of time, the rights were undiminished and could be reactivated. The transfer of such important property was normally marked by a great feast and the presentation of return gifts. The guests at the feast served as witnesses to the exchange and the value placed upon the tepee or other property. In this way, the origin, ownership, and transfer of a tepee design were recorded in memories and community oral traditions.

With the rights to a tepee came the right

to a designated camping position when all the tribe gathered for the Medicine Lodge ceremony. At that time, the tribe set up the tepees in a great circle opening to the east, its form echoing that of the individual tepees, whose doors faced east. Little Bluff's two tepees held the two most prestigious positions within the circle, immediately south of the entrance. His Yellow Tepee stood in first place and the Tepee with Battle Pictures next to it.

In 1864, two years before his death, Little Bluff transferred the rights to the Tepee with Battle Pictures, along with his own illustrious name, to his sister's son Gathering Feathers. In Kiowa reckoning, such a nephew could be considered as close a descendant as a son, and the relationship was often more affectionate in nature. For some years, the new Little Bluff (we might call him Little Bluff II) continued to renew



the tepee regularly. With the death of his uncle, however, the tribe lost the leadership of a single chief whose authority all respected. The decade following Little Bluff's death was one of sporadic but debilitating warfare, as U. S. troops drove the Kiowa onto ever smaller reservations (assigned to them by treaties that the Indians poorly understood or to which only a portion of the tribe agreed). In 1875, Little Bluff II's band—among the last to surrender—was confined to a reservation in western Indian Territory, now Oklahoma.

With their hunting territory restricted and the buffalo exterminated, the Kiowa began to make tepee covers of canvas, which proved to be more durable, if not more beautiful, than buffalo hide. The canvas, as well as food and other goods on which the Kiowa came to depend, was issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and

distributed by its agency at Anadarko. Although such goods were annuities guaranteed by treaties or payments for land cessions, they were not doled out with great regularity. The wealth that had supported feasts and gatherings at which painted tepees and other symbols of status were proudly displayed became a thing of the past. Painted tepees began to fall into disuse, and even plain canvas tepees gave way to Army-issue tents and, in rare cases, lumber houses.

In his later years, Little Bluff II gave his prestigious name to a cousin, a son of Little Bluff. From then on he was known as Shoulder Blade, a nickname reflecting the stooped posture of old age. He also sought on several occasions to bestow the rights to the Tepee with Battle Pictures on various descendants. None, however, could finalize the transfer with an appropriate re-

A drawing from the 1870s shows the tepee when it belonged to Little Bluff II. A warrior society sash hangs at left, while three shields are displayed at right.

School of American Research; Santa Fe, NM; SAR 1990-9-3



ciprocal gift until 1881, when one of his sons, White Buffalo, was able to make a suitable return. Shoulder Blade continued to live in the tepee until his death in the winter of 1891-92. Made of canvas, it was the last painted tepee still in use among the Kiowa, although it had not been renewed for a number of years and was in poor condition, the images barely discernible.

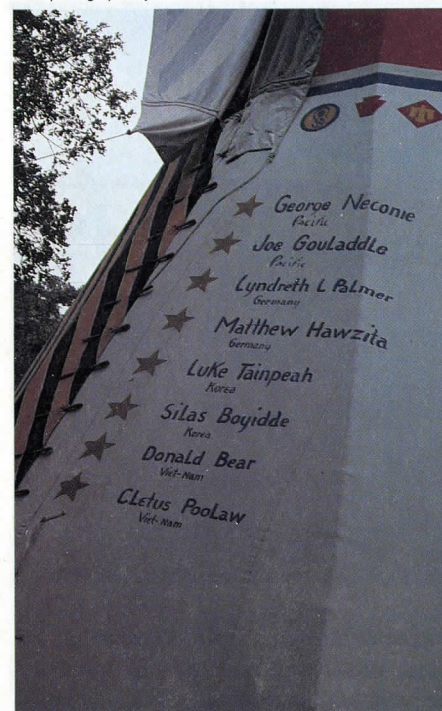
When James Mooney, an ethnologist with the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, began his studies among the Kiowa in 1891, he was particularly intrigued by the designs painted on tepees and shields. While few of these objects remained, Kiowa still held extensive knowledge about them. Mooney involved a broad a spectrum of the community in his research, while respecting local custom regarding the ownership of knowledge. He always sought to interview the person who held the rights to a design or at least a member of the family for whom the design was traditional. In addition to learning the origin and significance of the designs, Mooney employed Kiowa artists to make a drawing of each one, based on its owner's description.

Much of the financial support for Mooney's early work among the Kiowa came from funding for major exhibitions, and he was always seeking materials suit-



A tepee inspired by the Tepee with Battle Pictures, right, has been adopted by the Black Leggings Warrior Society, a Kiowa veterans organization. Its design now includes, below, the names of the eight Kiowa who died serving in the U. S. armed forces.

Both photographs by Bill Meadows



able for display. For the World Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, he arranged for the creation of scale models of items, such as shields and tepees, that were no longer in use. For the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis, Mooney was determined to reproduce the entire Kiowa camp circle as it would have appeared at the Medicine Lodge ceremony in the year 1867, each tepee to stand about two feet tall. He imported buckskins and paints from Chicago and hired a number of workers to cut and sew the covers and to whittle tepee poles and pegs to stake the covers down. He again involved the families of the owners, some of whom chose to paint their own designs while others supervised the work of a skilled artist.

Mooney was not able to produce the number of tepees he had wished, and the facilities at the exhibition must have been a great disappointment. Instead of being arranged in a forty-foot circle, as he had envisioned, the tepees were spread flat against the backs of conventional glass cases. But before they were shipped east, the tepee models were set up as intended, in a circle with its opening to the east, on



the Kiowa Reservation. In the center stood the brushy arbor of a model Medicine Lodge, its floor strewn with sweet-smelling sage.

One of the models that Mooney commissioned during these years was the Tepee with Battle Pictures. The model was painted by High Forehead, twin brother of White Buffalo, the son who had received the tepee in 1881. High Forehead, most commonly called Charley Buffalo, was a

recognized artist. He painted the distinctive black and yellow stripes on the south side of the model and the rows of tomahawks and feathered lances on the north side. But only seven battle scenes fit onto the small cover, including one at the top of the tepee of a single warrior encircled by U. S. soldiers. Mooney noted that the battle scenes were all imaginary, for "the artist has no correct knowledge of the historical incidents recorded upon the actual

tepee." More likely, Charley Buffalo—who lived in the tepee as a child and must have witnessed its renewal on more than one occasion—used imaginary events because he knew that actual deeds should not be represented without obtaining their owners' permission.

In about 1916, Charley Buffalo painted the Tepee with Battle Pictures again, this time full size. More than a hundred people gathered to watch. Charley Buffalo invited

eminent old warriors to record their deeds on the new canvas cover, in addition to the classic stripes, tomahawks, and lances. While no record exists that the rights to the tepee had been formally transferred to Charley Buffalo, perhaps by this time the tepee was regarded as a family possession rather than a purely personal one.

While many traditional gatherings had been abandoned, the twentieth century offered new opportunities for display of this

prestigious tepee. A photograph of the renewed tepee appears in various publications as an elegant illustration of Kiowa tepee life. Elaborately costumed in a painted buckskin dress and holding a heavily beaded cradleboard, Charley Buffalo's wife, Mary, poses astride a horse behind the tepee. Another photograph taken on the same occasion shows a front view of the tepee. Amid other indications that the tepee stands in a fairground, a placard





leans against the door, announcing "Admission—5¢." The tepee also appeared in several scenes of the 1917 silent film *Daughter of the Dawn*.

Following this grand renewal, the Tepee with Battle Pictures again ceased to be made, although it continued to hold an important place in Kiowa oral tradition. By the 1960s, tepees had begun to reappear at powwows and other Indian gatherings, as well as at tourist events. Most were plain, but a soaring tepee set amid the jumble of canvas and rip-stop nylon tents and pickup campers brought significant family prestige. The Tepee with Battle Pictures itself made a brief reappearance in 1961. This incarnation, based on an illustration of the model in one of Mooney's books, was painted by a great-grandson of Little Bluff, Roland Whitehorse (unfortunately, it was soon ruined when fats oozing from

the poorly tanned hides caught fire and the tepee had to be doused with water).

In 1973, a display of a dozen full-size, painted tepees was arranged for the grounds of the Southern Plains Indian Museum in Anadarko, Oklahoma. Among them were re-creations of old designs, including the Tepee with Battle Pictures, which was painted on canvas by Kiowa artist Dixon Palmer, again working from the illustration of Mooney's model. The tiny figures that had crowded the scale model suddenly assumed heroic proportions. The tepee's reappearance was greeted with enthusiasm, although Palmer claimed no relationship to the family of Little Bluff.

The following year, a new tepee inspired by the Tepee with Battle Pictures was adopted as the official tepee of the Black Leggings Warrior Society, a Kiowa

*The Black Leggings Tepee honors veterans with reproductions of their service patches instead of battle pictures.*  
Delores Twohatchet

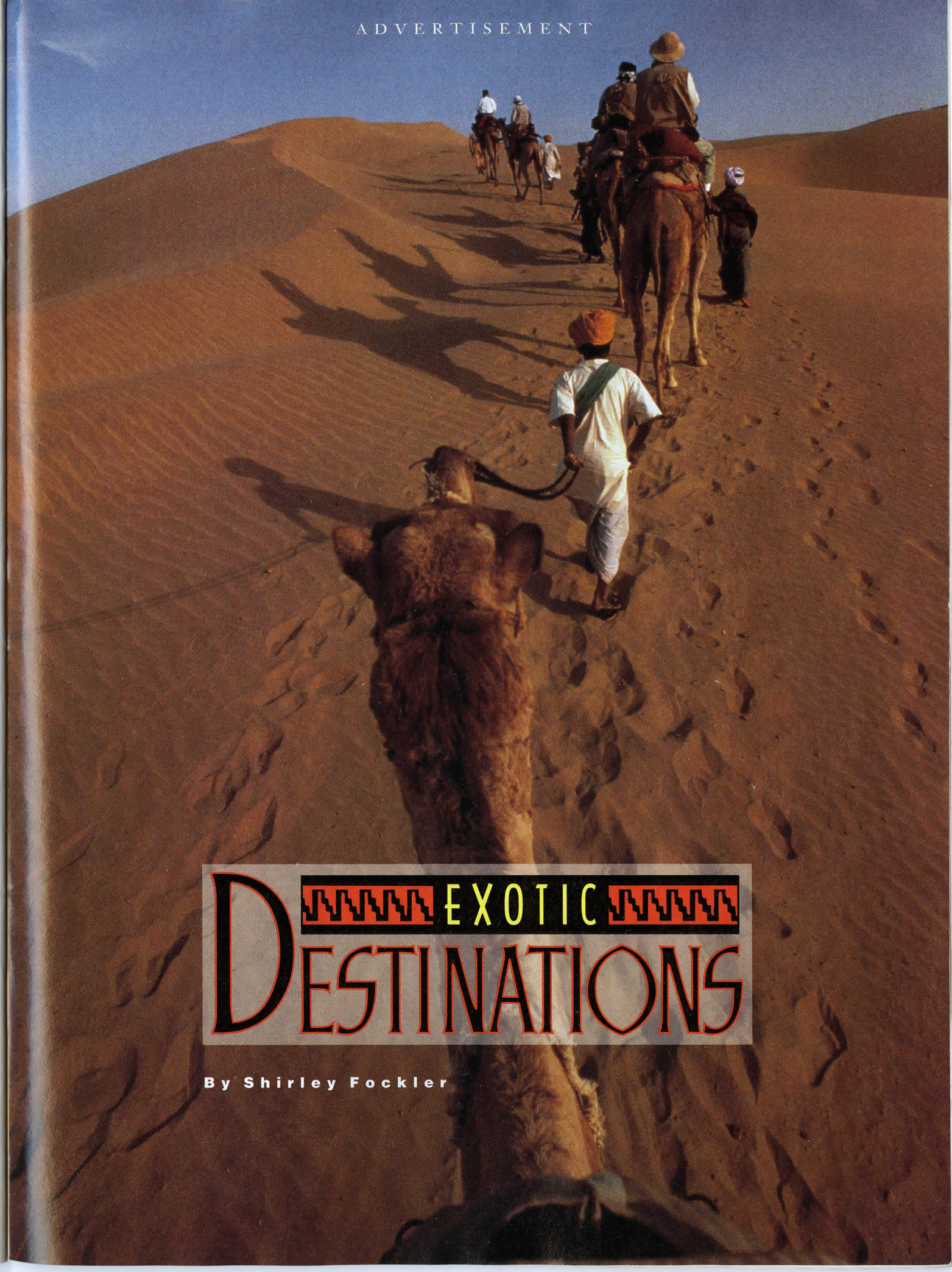
veteran's organization that had been formed in 1958 and conceived as a direct revival of an old warrior society of the same name. Dixon Palmer's brother Gus, the organizer and commander of the society, explained that he got the idea for the tepee following a celebration held by the Fort Sill Museum in honor of Little Bluff. According to Palmer, Little Bluff, a distinguished warrior and chief, had himself been a member of the Black Leggings.

Dixon Palmer and another brother, George, painted the tepee. This time the tepee was not a reproduction of Mooney's model, but a new creation guided by oral traditions. The south side retained the black and yellow stripes representing war experiences, while the north side depicted the specific military deeds of present society members. Tanks, paratroopers, and bomber and fighter planes covered the surface. Shoulder patches and service ribbons were also reproduced, and the door flap was painted solid red in honor of the eight Kiowa soldiers who gave their lives while serving the United States of America.

Like the old tepees made of buffalo hide, the new tepee (now of Permasol sailcloth) has been renewed from time to time over the years, changing somewhat each time. Pictures of service patches honor Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm veterans, as well as those from earlier wars. The Kiowa still recognize that the tepee resembles Little Bluff's, but it is now known as the Black Leggings Tepee.

While the Black Leggings have created a tepee of their own, other versions of the Tepee with Battle Pictures continue to appear as artistic creations. In 1992, Vanessa Paukeigope Morgan produced a three-foot-high version of the tepee for an exhibit at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. Morgan is a great-great-great-granddaughter of Little Bluff II. For her model, Morgan drew upon family history to depict military deeds, such as her great-grandfather Paukeigope's battle with the Ute. Respecting the Kiowa tradition that only men could reproduce such images, she instructed her son Seth in drawing the battle pictures. □

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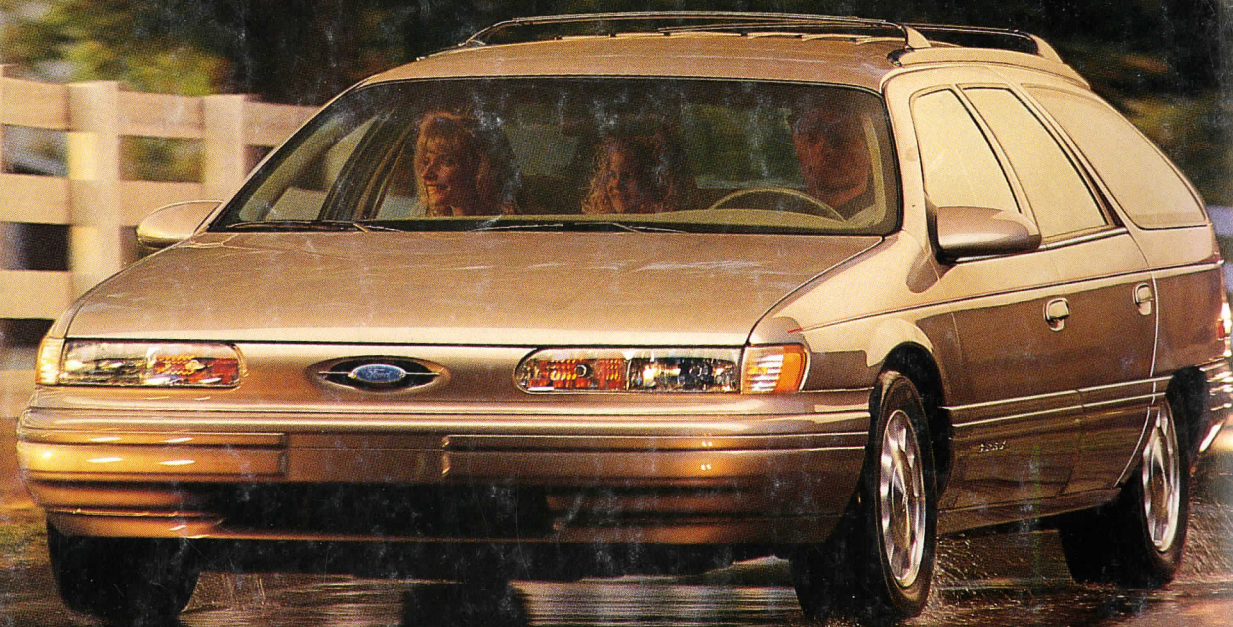


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By Shirley Fockler



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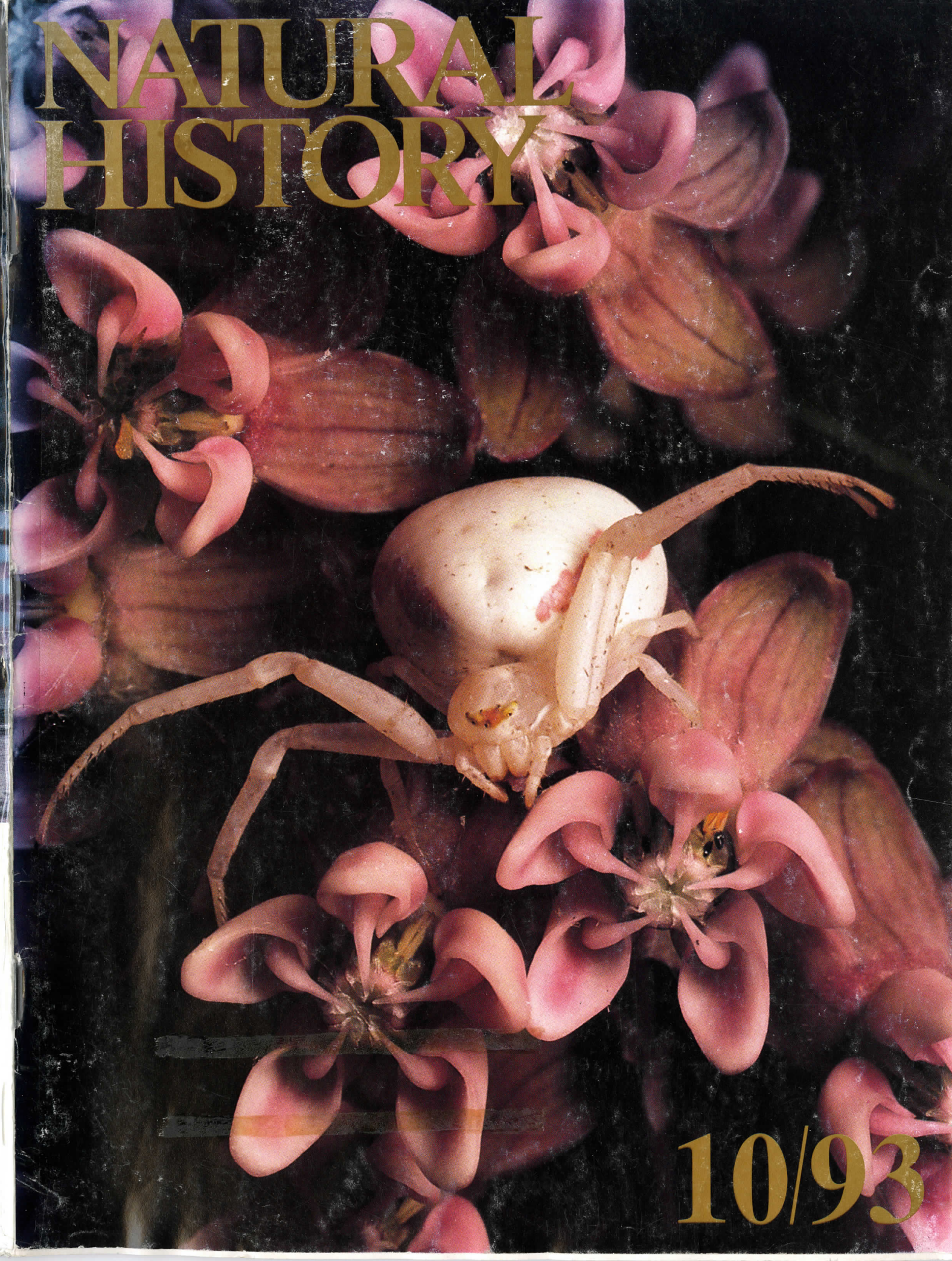
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