

Sharing Kiowa Culture through the Mud Sawpole Mysteries

by D.M. Rowell

Koyh Mi O Boy Dah

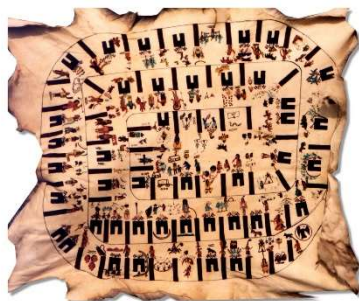


At sixty, I wrote my first mystery novel, *Never Name the Dead*. The story had been brewing since my childhood, when I dreamed of being an author someday.

My first novel features Mae, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur summoned back to the former Kiowa, Comanche, Apache reservation of her youth by her grandfather, a traditional Kiowa. Once in Oklahoma she's known as Mud, a childhood nickname that stuck. Immediately upon arrival, Mud is thrown into an unexpected spiritual quest as she faces childhood foes, judgmental tribe members, artifact thefts, illegal fracking, and a charging buffalo to discover who is guilty of theft and murder.

As *Never Name the Dead* developed, it was natural to add my Kiowa heritage to the series. I was heavily influenced by my grandfather, C.E. Rowell – artist, Kiowa historian, Tribal Elder, and master storyteller. My grandpa, his sisters and his brother shared Kiowa stories and songs with us from my earliest memories. The rhythm of the Kiowa language captivated me. The Kiowa elders all used the old Plains Indian-style sign language while speaking in Kiowa or English. In either language their hands flew in accompaniment to their words, adding a hypnotic show to the already rhythmic sounds.

While my great-aunt Arletta sang Kiowa lullabies and told winter stories, it was Grandpa, the late C.E. Rowell, who taught me the history of the Kiowa people. My grandfather was recognized as the Tribe Historian and Reader of the Dohason and Onko pictoglyph calendars called Sai-Guat, or Winter Marks.



*The Dohason Calendar: one of the Kiowa
Sai-Guat chronicles*

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

Of the Plains Indians, four tribes—Kiowa, Lakota, Blackfeet and Mandan—added to their oral storytelling tradition with pictoglyph markings on hides documenting a significant event that occurred each year. Only the Kiowa noted two events a year, one for winter and the other for summer.



The significant event was so well known within the tribe, it named the year. For example, on the Dohason Calendar (left), the winter of 1833-34 is recorded as *Da pi gya-de-sai*, "Winter When the Stars Fell." Drawn on the deerskin, above a dark bar denoting winter, are four stars falling from the sky as a Kiowa man slept. It is said that the tribe awoke to a night turned day as an avalanche of falling stars lit up the dark sky.

Newspaper headlines of the period tell of a Leonid meteor storm that brought daylight to the night across the United States on November 13, 1833. We use "Winter When the Stars Fell" to align events in the Kiowa calendars to Western dates.

As a young boy, Grandpa watched the then Tribe Historian and last Calendar Maker, Onco, work on his *Sai-Guat* chronicling the tribe's final battles, relentless pursuit by the cavalry, and the early struggles of reservation life. From Onco, my grandfather learned Kiowa history and its importance to the tribe.



C.E. Rowell showing tribe members a story from one of the Kiowa Calendars (1999)

At a tribe gathering, Grandpa would start a story from one of the *Sai-Guats*. He recited the main event for the tribe from a specific year and season; this prompted others to tell stories from their family history. Remembered stories, history and legends would unfold through the night, bringing us all closer as a people with a shared history.

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

At home, we would get our own shows. Grandpa would roll out a deerskin calendar. I remember it was wrapped in a once-white sheet, now near brown with age. I would watch carefully as the Calendar was being unrolled. The hair of the long-dead deer was always what I glimpsed first, then as the hide revealed itself, primitive figures and bright colors danced across the cured leather's inside.



Onco Sai-Guat Calendar

Grandpa would seem to gaze into the calendar, then his eyes traveled up, reviewing the art that covered all available wall surfaces until finally he would point at one of his paintings, using it to vividly draw another story of our people, our culture and events.

Summer days, I trailed Grandpa everywhere. He would often visit with family and friends. With every stop, there were stories. I remember him gathering with his friends, several with grey-streaked braids down their backs. They would talk of growing up as the first Kiowas born to reservation life, of the stories heard from their grandparents – the Old Ones. Often silent tears rolled down creased cheeks as stories of dawn raids, starvation, and captured family members thrown into a pit to live for months were retold.



Kiowa camp scene by C. E. Rowell – Sharing Kiowa history

I sat quietly, listened, and heard of Kiowa life before white settlers, of battles won and lost, of daily reservation life, of births and survival. I learned the importance of stories.

When I was twelve, I remember lingering, hoping for another story as Grandpa rolled up one of the deerskin calendars. Mid-roll, Grandpa pointed at me with his chin in the style of the Old Ones and decreed, “You. You will keep these stories alive. You are next.” A chill shot through me as a weight descended. Our eyes locked, and my body trembled with the truth of it. In that moment, I knew I had a responsibility.

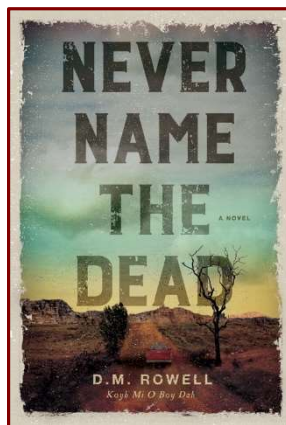
Even now at sixty-three, I remember that moment vividly. It is my turn, my responsibility, my privilege to share our Kiowa stories.

Grandpa taught me about our Kiowa culture through his art, the Dohason and Onco Calendars, history books with corrections carefully noted, and, best of all, visits to tribe elders. I listened and learned, always searching for ways to share our Kiowa stories with others. From Grandpa, I learned Kiowa history and its importance to the tribe.

Sharing Kiowa Culture, continued

Many elders in the tribe broke traditions and allowed me to bring cameras to record them as they shared memories, stories, sweats, crafts, songs and dances to ensure future Kiowas learned about their culture, history and language. Using the precious footage, I produced two documentaries on the tribe, *Vanishing Link* and *Learning Kiowa*. Working with the Kiowa Tribe, I sought out several of the last native speakers to provide lessons on the Kiowa Language. The elders not only discussed how to speak the Kiowa language with its unique sounds, they also shared precious childhood memories of growing up with treasured grandparents who had been born free in Kiowa Country and died captured on scraps of reservation lands. Many of the Kiowa language lessons are available here, <http://www.dmrowell.com/kiowas.html>.

Blending my background into the Mud Sawpole mysteries seemed a natural way to share Kiowa culture and history with a wider audience—a way to keep Kiowa culture alive.



Like her protagonist, Mud, D.M. Rowell comes from a long line of Kiowa Storytellers within a culture that treasures oral traditions. She's an award-winning and nominated producer and writer of several documentaries, including *Vanishing Link: My Spiritual Return to the Kiowa Way*, seen on PBS and winner of TrailDance 2007 Best Oklahoma Documentary. After a three-decade career spinning stories for Silicon Valley startups and corporations with a few escapes to create independent documentaries, Rowell started a new chapter writing a mystery series that features a Silicon Valley professional Kiowa woman and her Plains Indian tribe, the Kiowas. The first in the series, *Never Name the Dead*, will be released November 8, 2022. Rowell enjoys life in California with her partner of thirty-eight years, their son, and a bossy, feral gray cat.