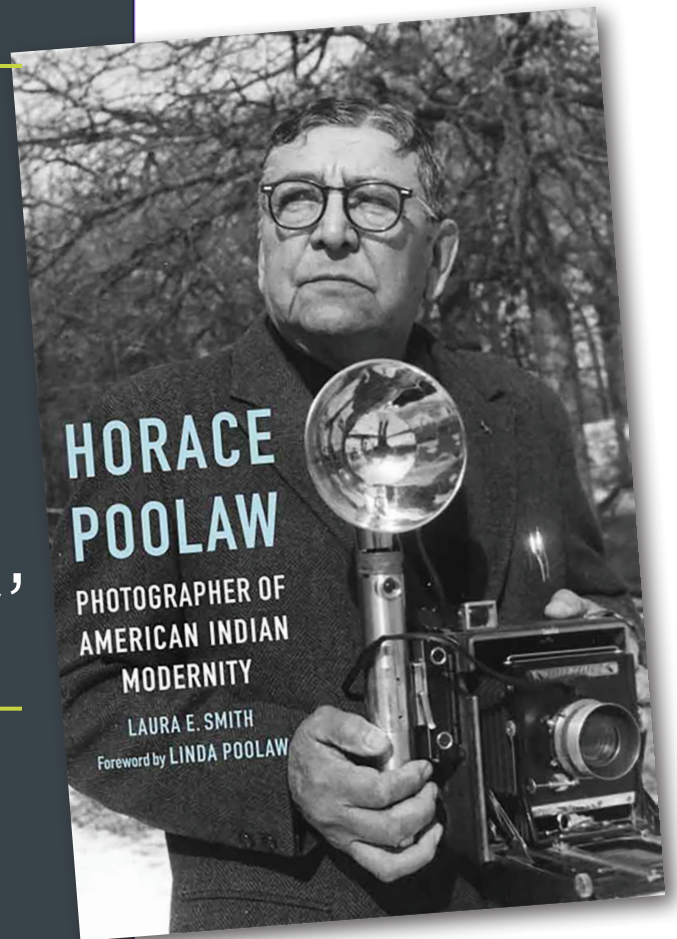

Laura Smith: 'Horace Poolaw, Photographer of American Indian Modernity'

As a graduate student at the University of New Mexico, Laura Smith was introduced to the work of Kiowa photographer Horace Poolaw, who was one of the first and most prolific American Indian photographers of his generation.

"I began my master's in 1999 when only one small catalog of Horace's work existed," said Smith, an Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture in MSU's Department of Art, Art History, and Design. "There were no comprehensive published accounts of Kiowa history of the 20th century. Anthropologists and others who worked among the Kiowa when Poolaw was young were mostly interested in the 19th and prior centuries."

Poolaw became the subject of Smith's thesis and now her recently released book, *Horace Poolaw, Photographer of American Indian Modernity*, which is a revised and largely expanded version of Smith's dissertation.



"From the beginning, I was struck by his views of early 20th century Native Americans," Smith said.

"Non-Indians don't often get to see what being modern and Indian looks like. Even more rarely acknowledged is an American Indian's awareness of the power of representation in this period, as well as concerns about the loss of cultural knowledge, such as Horace possessed."

The idea that cultural identity is static is part of what Smith said she is trying to challenge with her book. She notes that her ancestors were different than she is, and American Indians are not the same as they were centuries ago, but non-Indians resist the image of the 21st century American Indian.

"Horace Poolaw strived to document, not the disappearance of the American Indian, but their resistance to assimilation while correcting misunderstandings of their culture," Smith said. "I have interpreted his work in line with



Assistant Professor Laura Smith

other scholarship on early indigenous photographers, which argues for a pro-Indian stance in protest of and in resistance to assimilation.”

Research Proved Difficult

Finding information on Poolaw proved difficult as he did not talk about his work or print very much of it because he couldn't afford to do so. In fact, there was only one exhibition of his work while he was alive.

“Much of my research focused on Bureau of Indian Affairs records in Washington, D.C., that primarily showed what was going on politically,” Smith said. “While several museums had his work, including postcards, they didn't know they were Poolaw's images.”

After his death in 1984, Poolaw's daughter was invited to work with students at Stanford University, and she drove out to California from Oklahoma with boxes of his photographs. Together, the students and family did some of the first documentation of his work.

Then, beginning in 1990, a traveling exhibit of Poolaw's photographs was mounted, which is when a lot of his more familiar images were first shown.

As part of her research, Smith made four trips to Oklahoma to speak with Poolaw's children, Linda and Robert, and to be connected with other family members over the 11 years it took her to complete her dissertation and book. She said they were invaluable in providing information on Horace's life.

The Early Years

Poolaw was born March 13, 2006, in Mountain View, Oklahoma, and was given the Indian name Py-bo (American Horse or Big Horse). He was one of 11 children in the Poolaw family.

He attended Mountain View (Oklahoma) public schools and developed an interest in photography as a teenager, acquiring his first camera when he was 15. Mostly self-taught, he sought out technical advice from local commercial photographers.

As Smith notes in her book's introduction:

“Poolaw never had his own darkroom. He took most of his photographs outdoors and set up a makeshift darkroom in his house. By the mid-1920s, he was taking his own photographs, had married his first wife Rhoda Redhorn (Kiowa), and had his first son, Jerry. Most of Poolaw's early images are portraits of family, friends, and noted leaders in the Kiowa Community....Horace pursued photography for fun, income, and to produce pictures so that the Kiowa people could remember themselves. His cameras were large-format types that accommodated 4" x 6" and 5" x 7" silver nitrate negatives, not the mass-market Kodaks. None of the Poolaw images that I examine in this book is a snapshot. The last camera Horace owned was a Speed Graphic by Graflex, the most popular professional camera from the 1930s through the 1950s.”

“Were he alive today, I think he would be continuing his work to nurture and sustain the Kiowa identity. Of course, this remains a complex issue,” Smith said. “Indigenous survival, as with any culture, depended upon (and continues to depend on) transformation. It's in the dynamic ways the Kiowa reshaped their culture and identities that I find Poolaw's pictures to be expressions of Indian modernity.”