

Oklahoma

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NATIONAL arts & humanities MONTH

Lesson 1: Dr. Angie Debo

Considered by many to be the “First Lady of Oklahoma History,” Dr. Angie Debo authored numerous books and hundreds of articles about Native American and Oklahoma history. Debo faced struggles throughout her career due to the fact that she was one of the only female historians of her generation and because the content of her books was considered controversial at the time. Ultimately, Debo persevered and triumphed to become regarded as one of Oklahoma’s greatest historians. She is acknowledged as an authority on Native American history, a visionary, and a historical heroine in her own right.



Dr. Angie Debo by Charles Banks Wilson
 Courtesy of the Oklahoma Arts Council and the artist

Born in 1890, Debo grew up near Marshall, Oklahoma. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Oklahoma in 1918. She then enrolled at the University of Chicago and earned a master’s degree in political science. Finding it difficult to obtain a teaching position as a woman, Debo eventually began teaching at West Texas State Teachers College and was curator of its Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum while working towards a Ph.D. in history at the University of Oklahoma, a degree she received in 1933.

Debo’s first book, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*, examined the impact of the American Civil War on the Choctaw tribe. It told the story from the perspective of the tribe rather than the white man. The book received the John H. Dunning Prize from the American Historical Association.

And Still the Waters Run, completed in 1936, detailed how Oklahoma’s Five Civilized Tribes were systematically deprived of the lands and resources granted to them by treaty after their forced removal from the southeastern United States. Publishers in Oklahoma refused to publish the book because of the controversial charges made against many leaders who were still living at the time. Princeton University Press finally published the book in 1940, and it is now described as a classic and influence for writers of Native American history.

Prairie City, the Story of an American Community was Debo’s only fictional work. It was based on the history of Debo’s hometown of Marshall.

Debo completed her final book, *Geronimo: The Man, His Time, His Place*, at the age of 85.

At the age of 95, Debo sat for Charles Banks Wilson, noted Oklahoma artist designated in 2004 as a Cultural Ambassador and recipient of the 2009 Oklahoma Humanities Award. It was Wilson’s goal for the portrait to capture Debo’s drive. Many of her literary works are pictured behind her. Since 1985, Debo’s portrait has hung in the Oklahoma State Capitol rotunda with some of Oklahoma’s most distinguished individuals as part of the Capitol Art Collection. Debo was present at the Capitol for the dedication of the portrait. She passed away in 1988, at the age of 98.

LEARN MORE:

1. Learn more about Angie Debo’s challenges as a woman historian and the hardships she encountered in publishing her work about American Indian history. Write an essay about what you discover and what her hard work means to you.
2. On a map, trace the route of one of the tribes on the Trail of Tears. Using an online mapping program, find out how long it would take to travel that route by car. How many miles does the trip cover? Then figure out how many hours it would take to travel the same distance by foot, assuming they traveled one mile every 30 minutes, given the rough terrain and weight of their possessions. Take a few minutes to reflect on how you would handle this challenge. Write a few paragraphs in a journal or diary imagining that you were on the journey with the group.
3. Dr. Debo began practicing her passion for writing at a young age when she kept a journal chronicling her experiences and observations about Oklahoma history, her hometown, and social justice. Begin your own journal and write in it daily. Record your daily activities and thoughts.
4. Using the internet, find a photograph of Angie Debo. Create your own portrait of her by looking at the photograph and drawing what you see. Charles Banks Wilson wanted to capture her drive in his portrait. What quality of hers do you want to capture?

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