

**ANGIE
ELBERTHA
DEBO
(1890-1988)**



**OKLAHOMA'S
GREATEST
INDIAN
HISTORIAN**

Her research was objective, but when she found all that was published was not the truth, she felt an obligation to get involved. Often labeled a troublemaker for the truth she uncovered, she still wanted to “discover the truth and publish it”. Her name was Angie Debo.

Angie Elbertha Debo was born in January 1890 near Beattie, Kansas. At age ten, Angie’s family arrived in Marshall, Oklahoma Territory. She received a diploma in 1902 from a one-room schoolhouse and obtained a teaching certificate at age sixteen and taught in nearby rural schools. Marshall’s high school opened in 1910, so she graduated in the first class at age 23 in 1913.

Debo earned her bachelor’s degree at the University of Oklahoma in 1918. After teaching history for several years, she studied history at the University of Chicago, but discovered the field was closed to women. Instead, she earned a master’s degree in international relations in 1924. She published her thesis “The Historical Background of the American Policy of Isolation”, but couldn’t find a teaching position.

From 1924 to 1933, she taught at West Texas State Teachers College and was curator of its Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, while earning her Ph.D. in history at the University of Oklahoma in 1933. For her dissertation, she incorporated oral history and tribal records while examining the history of the Choctaws. In 1934, “The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic” was published by the University of Oklahoma Press. Soon after, she was dismissed by the college.

Back in Marshall, she signed with the University of Oklahoma Press to study Five Civilized Tribes history. Researching old tribal records in the Department of the Interior basement in Washington DC, Debo uncovered a criminal conspiracy of swindling Indian allotment-land by making them sign documents they couldn’t understand and abducting wealthy children to become their guardians.

Debo’s manuscript documented the illegal activities at the Muskogee Federal Courthouse – and naming prominent citizens, including U. S. Senator Robert Owen, former Governor Charles Haskell and Dawes Commission head Tams Bixby. Threatened by lawsuits, the University of Oklahoma refused to publish the book in 1936. Finally, in 1940, Princeton University Press published “And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes” but it received little attention in Oklahoma, except in tribal museum libraries.

Between 1933 and 1947, Debo found employment opportunities nonexistent. She edited “Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State” but her history chapter was rewritten anonymously claiming “white people settled the vacant land of Oklahoma”. In 1947, she finally obtained a job as a curator or maps at the Oklahoma A&M University library. In 1974, she published her final book “Geronimo: The Man, His Time, His Place”, a sympathetic biography of the great Apache leader.

Debo gradually gained recognition for her work. In 1950 she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame and Women’s Hall of Fame in 1984. She received the Henry G. Bennett OSU Service Award in 1976. Her official portrait was dedicated at the Oklahoma State Capitol in 1985 next to Will Rogers, Jim Thorpe and state leaders she exposed in her books.

Debo was interviewed for a 1988 PBS television documentary entitled “Indians, Outlaws, and Angie Debo”, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvwHKBRxTfg>, but died shortly before its release at age 98. “I violated history by telling the truth.” And indeed she did.