

**ISABEL ALICE
HARTLEY
CRAWFORD
1865-1961**



**PREACHING
THROUGH
SILENT
SPEECH**

The Women's Baptist Home Mission Society (WBHMS) assigned Isabel Crawford to work among the Kiowas. She didn't want to go to the 'dirty Indians', but with a determined sense of mission, she set out for the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation in Oklahoma Territory.

Isabel Alice Hartley Crawford was born in May 1865 in Cheltenham, Ontario, Canada. In 1883, while living in Dakota Territory, Isabel became gravely ill, suffering fevers and pain for about six months. When she recovered, she was nearly deaf "from an overdose of quinine" but she graduated in 1893 from a two-year course at the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago.

To communicate between tribes with different languages, Indians used the Plains Indian sign language. Crawford had to communicate through an interpreter, by lip reading, or using a hearing device hung around her neck. A Kiowa man named Koptah took it upon himself to teach this sign language to her. Crawford worked at Elk Creek Mission for three years before moving to Saddle Mountain near Mountain View in 1896. Lucius Aitsan had studied at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and worked with other missionaries so he interpreted for Crawford.

To win their trust, Crawford cleaned, washed, baked bread, carried firewood, cared for the ill, and taught women sewing and quilting while instructing them from the Bible. Through the sale of quilts, she saved money to build the Saddle Mountain Baptist Church with a 160-acre allotment from the federal government and an additional forty acres for a cemetery. On Easter Sunday 1903, the church held its first service with 64 Kiowas and Crawford.

They had no pastor, so the Kiowas chose Lucius Aitsan to celebrate the Eucharist (women weren't allowed) but the mission board disapproved. In 1904, the congregation was censured by the Oklahoma Indian Baptist Association. Although supported by WBHMS, Crawford felt the male administration resented her success in building the church so she resigned. Before leaving Saddle Mountain, she declared that she "would sooner lie hidden among the tall weeds of the unkept Indian cemetery...than in any other burial ground in the whole world". The Kiowas wouldn't forget her.

Still working for WBHMS, she traveled around the country speaking at churches. She regularly concluded her presentations with her Plains Indian sign language-version of the Lord's Prayer. Over the years Crawford remained in contact with the Kiowas, visiting Saddle Mountain several times. Her love for the Kiowas at Saddle Mountain remained strong, and their affection for her persisted for decades because she lived among them and shared their sorrows when disease and death entered the camps – and brought them the Christian message in their own language.

She retired in 1929 to Grimsby, Ontario, where she lived until her death in November 1961 at age 96. Per her wishes, her family returned her body to Oklahoma, to be buried in the Saddle Mountain Indian Baptist Church Cemetery with descendants of her converts serving as pallbearers. The inscription on her tombstone read, "I Dwell Among Mine Own People".

Isabel Crawford couldn't hear the Kiowa language, but learning Plains Indian sign language enabled her not only to bring them the Christian message but also to forge a strong bond with them and earn their trust. Her silent speech had become a powerful agent for communicating the gospel.