

**MILDRED  
IMACH  
CLEGHORN**  
1910-1997



**APACHE  
LEADER  
AND DOLL  
MAKER**

True inspiration lies in the stories of individuals who touch our lives. Often, we don't recognize the significance of ordinary people living through extraordinary circumstance. It is from these lives lived we take heart, courage and hope. There is nothing more meaningful or powerful. Mildred Cleghorn was such a person.

Mildred Imach was born a prisoner of war at Fort Sill in December 1910. Her grandfather followed Geronimo into battle. The then Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache Tribe was taken captive as part of Geronimo's surrender in 1886. The children were sent to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, forbidden to speak their language. The rest of the tribe was shipped from Arizona to be imprisoned at St. Augustine, Florida, then Mount Vernon, Alabama and finally, the few left were removed to Fort Sill in 1894. The tribal name was changed to Fort Sill Apache because this was final place the remnants of these proud and once powerful people were incarcerated by their government.

The government had promised that the members of the tribe would be prisoners for two years, but the tribe wasn't freed for 27 years, offered land in Oklahoma or Mescalero, New Mexico in 1913. The Cleghorn family settled on forty acres near Apache. Cleghorn later recalled her first moments of freedom were spent in a horse-drawn wagon as her family traveled to an isolated 40-acre plot near Apache. She was three years old.

Mildred graduated from Apache High School in 1930 and later Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. She worked for the Kansas Bureau of Indian Affairs until 1937. In 1941 she received a degree in home economics from Oklahoma A&M College in Stillwater. She worked as a home extension agent for several agencies, including the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico; the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Pawnee agencies in Oklahoma; and the Potawatomi agency in Horton, Kansas.

During this time, she met her husband, William Cleghorn in Kansas. They married on the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico. They also adopted a daughter Penny. In 1942, Cleghorn began making dolls, representing traditional female clothing of all the Indian tribes she served. Each costume was painstakingly researched, constructed and adorned. She soon became nationally famous. In more than fifty years, she made at least 41 dolls that have been displayed in various museums.

She also worked for sixteen years as a home economics teacher, first at Fort Sill Indian School in Lawton and then at Riverside Indian School at Anadarko. Later, she taught kindergarten at Apache Public School, retiring in 1973. In 1976, when the Chiricahua tribe was formally recognized by the U. S. government, Cleghorn became the first chairperson of the Fort Sill Apache Tribe. Cleghorn refused to be bitter about her family's captivity but instead put her trust in God. She was proud of her heritage and deeply loved her people. She did everything she could for them. Her leadership revolved around preserving traditional history and Chiricahua culture. She retired from the post at age 85 in 1995.

Her awards included the Ellis Island Award in 1987 presented by President Reagan and recognition by President Clinton as one of the few surviving American-born prisoners of war at a tribute at the White House, which was long overdue.

On June 10, 1996, Cleghorn joined a class action suit against the mismanagement of Indian money held in trust by the U. S. Government. They hoped to get a reliable accounting of hundreds of millions of dollars in Indian trust funds. She didn't live to see the results of the lawsuit. She died in an automobile accident near Apache April 1997 at age 86. She is buried at the Apache Beef Creek Cemetery at Fort Sill, where Geronimo is buried.

In 2009 the lawsuit was settled for \$3.4 billion in the Indians' favor. Throughout her life, Cleghorn never forgot the original wrong done by the government to the Fort Sill Apaches. Each part of her life – from her birth in captivity at Fort Sill to her Indian doll-making hobby – was its own story that made people stop to listen when the quiet and humble woman spoke.