

## **Keeper of the Plains**

By Erin Raux, Museum Director and Curator of the Mid-America All-Indian Museum

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During the 1940s, many American Indians in Oklahoma were encouraged to move to Wichita and build planes for the war effort. They built homes, raised families, and became part of the community. This is the group that came together in 1969 and formed what is now the Mid-America All-Indian Museum.

One young artist and draftsman, Francis Blackbear Bosin, who made Wichita his home was a famous Kiowa-Comanche artist also known as Tsate Kongia which means Blackbear in the Kiowa language. We are fortunate to have the largest display of his artwork in the museum today.

In the traditional Comanche manner, Bosin was born June 5, 1921, in a tipi near Cement, Oklahoma. As the oldest male, he was sent to live with his maternal grandparents as soon as he was able to walk and lived with them for more than three years. At age six, he entered St. Patrick's Mission school. His Kiowa father and Comanche mother had attended the same school in their youth and raised their son to speak English as they did not know each other's native language. It helped young Bosin when he attended that same catholic school since only English was allowed. He grew up with little education about his heritage and learned to walk in the white world.

In 1968, while in the hospital for a stress related illness, Bosin was asked by Elmer Hall from Kansas Gas and Electric Company to design a statue as a beautification project for the area. The company had built an unattractive addition and wanted to beautify the area while focusing on our American Indian heritage in Kansas. The iconic 44' Keeper of the Plains stands behind The Mid-America All-Indian Museum and adorns the Wichita skyline.

The Keeper was not built until 1974 – 6 years after the drawing. The community came together to find the funding to construct the sculpture. Without those fundraising efforts, and Tom Washburn of Architectural Metal Products' generosity honoring the original bid made 6 years before construction-, the Keeper wouldn't exist today.

Created from Cor-Ten Weathering steel, the Keeper, which faces east to greet the rising sun, took 12 welders from Architectural Metal Products – known as the Dirty Dozen three months to cut and weld the sculpture in time for the dedication on May 18, 1974. In 2006, as part of a beautification project, the city of Wichita elevated the Keeper onto a 30' rock and built the bridges and plaza area.

The Keeper is the iconic symbol of Wichita and knowing the story of its creation reminds us of how our community is willing to help each other and create something to share. This project, which started out as a humble idea in the mind of a local artist, beloved by Wichitans, became THE iconic symbol of Wichita.

You can learn more about Blackbear Bosin and other works of art he created by visiting the Mid-America All-Indian Museum. Right now, the entire museum is turned over to 'all things Bosin' to celebrate what would have been his 100th birthday on June 5th, 2021!

*This transcript of "Keeper of the Plains" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*