

Tarver captures culture of black cowboy in his images

BY TONI HOPPER
THE DUNCAN BANNER

A special photography exhibit is on display at the Chisholm Trail Heritage Center, featuring the work of Oklahoma native Ron Tarver. "The Long Ride Home: The African American Cowboy Experience in America" went on display June 1 and will be

up through Aug. 31.

"Coming from Oklahoma this project was very special to me," Tarver told The Banner via email.

"My grandfather was a cowboy in the old



Ron Tarver

sense. In the 1940s he worked on a ranch and drove cattle from near Brages to Catoosa."

The exhibit highlights CTHC's summer program, "Black Cowboy: Tall Tale or Top Hand."

The photographs have a strong visual impact, depicting scenes from the black cowboy culture — parades and the action in the arena, portraits of

aging cowboys and that of young rodeo queens. And the photographs also help tell the story of his grandfather.

"It was a hard life and my mother recounted tales growing up on a small ranch in a valley in the foothills of the Ozarks. She thought heaven was on the other side of the

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mountain," Tarver said. "The story fulfills my dream to honor my grandfather for one and highlight those people in the African American (culture) who continue their western heritage."

Tarver, who was born in Fort Gibson and now lives in Elkins Park, Pa., has established a successful career as a published and prestigious photographer.

He is known in several circles — the news industry, photojournalism, sports and even fine art.

This didn't happen overnight, but is something he's strived for over the past 30 years.

"When I moved to the East Coast, I was amazed that people had never heard of or didn't know there were black cow

boys. It was a story I wanted to tell for a long time," Tarver said.

"After a photo essay that ran in the Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday magazine that produced more letters than I had ever gotten at the time, I was approached by National Geographic."

His journey before that time started at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma where he earned a B.A. in Journalism and Graphic Arts.

His work as a photojournalist has been published in National Geographic, Sports Illustrated, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Inquirer Sunday Magazine, Life, Time, Newsweek, and Black and White Magazine. In 1995, he earned the National Newspaper Magazine Society Award for Documentary Photography.

Tarver also has co-authored "We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans," published by Harper Collins in

2004. That book was accompanied by a traveling exhibition that debuted at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

As a fine art photographer, Tarver is a 2001 Pew Fellow in the Arts and has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and a 2007 Independence Foundation Fellowship.

He was named one of the Delaware Valley's "50 Rising Stars in the Arts" by Seven Arts Magazine and is 1999 alumni of the Center for Emerging Visual Artist.

He serves as visiting instructor of photography at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pa.

Exhibited nationally and internationally in over 30 solo and 50 group exhibitions, Tarver's work is included in many private, corporate, and museum collections. This includes the Banana Republic corporate

collection, in San Francisco, Calif., and in Philadelphia Museum of Art, The State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, the Oklahoma Museum of History and the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. His work is represented by the Sande Webster Gallery, Philadelphia, Pa., Robin Rice Gallery, New York, N.Y., the Packard Reath Gallery in Lewes, Delaware, Soho-Myriad in Atlanta, Ga., and Grand Image in Seattle, Wash.

Chisholm Trail Heritage Center is open 7 days a week, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. In addition to the Tarver exhibit, the museum also has the Bud Pawless exhibit featured in the Garis Gallery of the American West. "Spirit of the West" will be displayed through July 31. See Monday's online news for a story on Pawless.