

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE CHOCTAW INDIANS
1800 - 1900

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PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to give a brief history of the social life of the Choctaw Indians, beginning in the first years of the nineteenth century and continuing through to the end of the century.

The author has attempted to bring to the reader enough of the essential facts to make a comprehensive and connected story, based on facts gathered from the best available sources covering this topic. The writer has sought to present this information in such a manner as to be of interest to the reader whether or not he is a student of history.

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CHAPTER I

PRIMITIVE CUSTOMS

The Choctaw Indians are one branch of the Muskogean linguistic stock. They are closely related to the Chickasaws and distantly related to the Creeks and Seminoles. They constitute the most numerous branch of the Great Muskogean stock. At the beginning of this study, in 1800, they lived in the central and southern parts of what is now the state of Mississippi and in the southeastern part of Alabama. As the white people moved into this area the Choctaws were persuaded to make treaties with the United States government in which they sold tract after tract of their land. Finally, in 1830, by the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, they agreed to give up all their land in Mississippi and Alabama and move to the new Indian territory, west of the Mississippi River, in what is now the state of Oklahoma.¹

The history of the Choctaws records the life of a group of people with a clearly defined citizenship, an autonomous government, and distinctive social customs that were of much importance in their daily lives.

One notable custom of the early Choctaws was that of head flattening. Because the heads of all the males were flat on the back and front they were called "flat-heads" by the early traders. Their heads were flattened by artificial methods.

¹Angie Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, 1.

Soon after a male child was born he was placed in a wooden cradle with a brick-like mold for his head. A bag of sand was placed on the forehead, which by continued gentle compression gave the head somewhat the form of a brick.² As a result of this practice the Choctaws had high lofty foreheads that sloped off to the back. They believed that this improved their looks.

The Choctaws always maintained a permanent home and seemed to have strayed from it far less than most Indians. However, like other Indians, they were fond of travel and it was their custom to scatter to their temporary camps each fall. Even after the white people began to move into their country they continued to move about among the white settlements. Some families traveled from forty to a hundred miles away from their permanent homes. Each spring they returned to their homes in time to plant their gardens and crops. While they were traveling and camping the men hunted and fished, the women cooked and made baskets out of cane, and the young people danced and played. The Choctaws had little difficulty in making their way about in unfamiliar parts of the country. Their watchful eyes marked every distinguishing feature of the area thereby making it possible for them to return to their camps.³

The criminal code of the early Choctaws was exacting, if not actually harsh. The most severe tribal law of the Choctaws

²John R. Swanton, "The Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 103, p. 118.

³Swanton, op. cit., 161.

was that of blood revenge for murder. "Whosoever sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed." - This statute was enforced not only by the Choctaws but by nearly all of the North American Indians. It was not only the right but the duty of the nearest male relative of the victim to kill the murderer. The murder might go unavenged for months and even years, but it was eventually avenged by the murdered man's relatives. When the murderer fled from the community to avoid reprisal, one of the criminal's male relatives, even though innocent and possibly even ignorant of the crime, might become the victim of the avenger of blood.⁴ In case the slayer did run away and one of his relatives was killed in his place he might return to his community without being molested. When he did return the name of a coward was given him and he was never respected by the people of his tribe. This code was severe but it kept crimes of violence at a minimum among the Choctaws.⁵

The custom of allowing the relatives to punish the slayer was set aside in 1821. At that time a law enforcement system known as the "Light Horse Police" was organized. The Light Horsemen had charge of the execution of criminals and the collection of debts. They apprehended criminals, tried the cases, and on conviction executed the sentences.⁶

⁴Debo, op. cit., 21.

⁵They would never take the life of a female relative of the slayer.

⁶Edward Davis, "Early Advancement Among the Five Civilized Tribes", Chronicles of Oklahama, XIV, (No. 2, 1936), 171.

When a murder was committed the Light Horseman took charge of the case and heard testimony on each side. They returned the verdict as they saw fit. When a person was found guilty they set the time and place for his execution. The doomed man was informed that his presence would be expected and he was allowed to go free until the time of his execution. It has been said that convicted Choctaws never failed to appear at the appointed time. When the time for execution came a red spot was painted over the doomed man's heart as a target for the executioner. He was placed in position and calmly received the fatal bullet. In some cases the doomed man steadily painted the red spot over his own heart.⁷

The condemned criminal could get the time for execution extended if he could present a good reason for delay. Any event which occupied a high place on the social calendar would serve as a basis for stay of execution. A hunt, a dance, or a ball game that was to take place a few days after the appointed time of execution could be pointed to as a reason for the desired delay. These requests were seldom refused. The doomed man set the day and the hour when he would return for the execution. He went to the hunt, or dance, or ball game and engaged in and enjoyed the fun with the rest. When the time for the execution came, he returned true to his word and was shot as a penalty for murder. A full-blood Choctaw was never known to evade the death penalty passed upon him by law. Never must

⁷Swanton, op. cit., 108.

he show any emotion or fear during his execution. When a doomed Choctaw warrior showed fear it was considered a disgrace to himself, his relatives, and to his nation. The rifle was always used as the instrument of execution by the Choctaws. They thought that a warrior who was executed by hanging would never join his friends in the "Happy World," or as it was also called the "Happy Hunting Grounds." Rather they believed that his spirit would always haunt the place where he was hanged.⁸

For minor offenses the Choctaws punished law breakers by whipping. The number of lashes that the law breaker received depended upon the nature of the crime committed. For stealing a horse one hundred lashes were given for the first offense. For stealing a chicken, only forty lashes. In practically all other cases fifty lashes were ordered for the first offense, one hundred for the second, and death by the rifle for the third.⁹ These methods for punishing crime were used in Oklahoma to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Whippings were social events in which the whole neighborhood took part. On the day set for the punishment all of the people in the community went to the church and visited until the time for the whipping. The man who was to receive the punishment--his "honor" would be sufficient to insure his voluntary presence--was as gay and as cheerful as any of them. When the time came for the whipping the offender was tied to a tree in

⁸Idem.

⁹Swanton, op. cit., 113.

the churchyard and was given the required number of lashes. Before the whipping the crowd went into the church house and closed the door. They sang the songs that the missionaries had taught them until the whipping was over. When the whippers had finished the people came out of the church house and formally shook hands with the victim. He was then reinstated to his former position in society. His crime and punishment were never again mentioned.¹⁰

The word of the Choctaw people could be depended upon when it was given. The Choctaws detested a liar and honored a man who would keep his word. When one of the Choctaw males was caught in a lie he was declared by his fellow tribesmen unfit for a warrior and was compelled to keep company with the squaws.¹¹

The Choctaws were not unduly aggressive or war loving. They usually waited until they were attacked by their enemies, and then they furiously fought back. When an enemy declared war upon the tribe the chiefs held a council to decide what action to take. They usually resolved to make war on the aggressor nation. A war dance which commonly lasted eight days usually preceded any military operation. This dance was to give the warriors courage. During the dance the warriors ate very little. They rubbed themselves with juices of herbs which were given to them by the medicine man. These juices were

¹⁰Swanton, op. cit., 112.

¹¹Ibid., 115.

supposed to give the warriors strength and courage. When the war dance was over they set out for the scene of battle.¹²

The Choctaw warriors were experts in deceiving their enemies. They had a general custom of going in small bands when on the war path. They traveled one behind the other in a straight line. When in enemy territory each one stepped exactly in the tracks of the one who walked before him. The last one erased as much as possible the tracks of all members of the band.¹³ The Choctaw warrior normally never attacked an awakened and alerted enemy. The dark hours of midnight were used to approach as close to the enemy as possible. If the ground was covered with leaves that might rustle and betray their presence, they had the patience to move them out of their path with their toes. In moving if they broke a small branch they imitated the cry of a bird in order to make it appear that a bird made the noise. The Choctaws usually attacked their enemy just at day break. When the death cry was uttered they all fired in unison. Each warrior selected his target and shot at a different enemy. They then sprang upon them with their war clubs to finish those who were only wounded. When the battle was over they scalped their victims and returned to their village. When they were in sight of the village they uttered the cry of warriors who had struck a blow. The people in the village went out to meet them. They celebrated their

¹²Ibid., 162.

¹³Bureau of American Ethnology, Forty Second Annual Report, (1928), 433.

victory by dancing.¹⁴

The return of a victorious war party served as an occasion for inducting capable youth of the tribe into the warrior class. In being made a warrior a boy had to suffer two hundred blows of a neck band. The neck band was a piece of hide five or six feet long and about an inch wide doubled many times. The warriors in turn would strike the boy on his back or belly. This was done to make him understand that a warrior must endure everything patiently. He had to sing while he suffered these blows. If a man cried while receiving the blows, he was never admitted to the select circle. He had to pass as a woman and was considered unworthy of being admitted into the body of warriors.¹⁵

Girls, women, and young boys captured by the Choctaws found slavery their lot. As slaves they were forced to work hard at menial tasks. In some cases they were made to perform the functions of a dog, guard the door, growl when anyone entered or left the house, eat the leavings of the dishes and gnaw the bones.¹⁶ The Choctaws sometimes got the name of being cowards because they did not wander abroad to do mischief as other savages did, but they were far from being cowards. They did not wander abroad for fear of having to content themselves with taking the scalp of women or children. By waiting for the enemy

¹⁴Swanton, op. cit., 162.

¹⁵Ibid., 163.

¹⁶Idem.

to attack and then pursuing them they were sure to take the scalps of men. They some times challenged their enemy to meet an equal number of Choctaws on an open plain. On such occasions they showed great bravery and fighting ability.¹⁷

The Choctaws' superstitious belief in witchcraft lead to very strange behavior even in wartime. When they went on military campaigns they took with them things which they looked on as the "genius" of the party. They most commonly carried the stuffed skin of a large owl. With great care the warriors kept watch over him and offered him a part of their meat. They always placed him with his head facing the ultimate destination. If something caused him to be turned in the direction from which they had come the members of the party considered this a very bad omen and an absolute order to return.¹⁸

The dignity of chieftianship was bestowed upon one who proved himself worthy by his skill and daring deeds in war. It was considered a disgrace for a chief to be surpassed by a warrior in daring deeds of war. It was also considered dishonorable for a warrior to be surpassed by his chief. These ideas led them to perform desperate deeds of valor. They did not wait for an opportunity for the display of heroism, but sought peril and toils by which they might distinguish themselves.¹⁹

¹⁷Debo, op. cit., 18.

¹⁸Bureau of American Ethnology, Forty Second Annual Report, (1924-1925), 427.

¹⁹Swanton, op. cit., 168.

When the Choctaws had promised to make peace, five or six of the leading men of the nation came bearing a calumet or pipe made of red stone. The calumet had a stem about two or three feet long surrounded by red feathers. This served as a means of sealing alliances formally pledging faithfulness among friends.²⁰ When they had concluded the peace the master of the ceremonies lighted the calumet and all of those who were in the assembly smoked two or three whiffs. Thereby peace was concluded and was inviolable. The Calumet was delivered to the chief with whom they had made the contract. It was given as a hostage of their good faith the fidelity with which they wished to observe the articles on which they had agreed.²¹

Among the most unique and distinctive of the early Choctaw customs were those related to marriage. The marriage ceremonies practised in the different Choctaw communities and villages did not differ greatly throughout the Choctaw nation. Marriage customs common in 1800 were still adhered to in some Choctaw communities in Mississippi as late as 1891.²²

When a Choctaw male saw a maiden that he would like to marry he watched for an opportunity to find her alone so that he could propose to her. He indicated interest in her by casting pebbles so that they fell near her feet so as to attract her attention. If the young man was acceptable to the young

²⁰They had two calumets: one represented peace and the other war.

²¹Debo, op. cit., 19.

²²Swanton, op. cit., 132.

woman she soon let it be known. This she did by returning the pebbles as slyly and silently as possible. If she did not care for the young man, a scornful look from her told him that all was in vain and that there was no need to press the suit. The youth then hurried away as quickly as possible.²³

When a marriage was agreed upon the lovers appointed a time and place for the ceremony. Friends and relatives were notified of the date and location of the coming event. The Choctaw guests usually arrived at the designated place the evening before the marriage day and spent the night in their camp. Early the next morning the women began cooking for the big feast that was held immediately after the marriage ceremonies. When it was time for the marriage to take place the maiden made her appearance on the wedding ground and took her seat on a shawl spread on the ground. Four men held a shawl over her head while her friends came forward and threw presents of different kinds upon the shawl held by the men. The presents interestingly enough were not given to the bride but were for her female relatives who had prepared the food for the feast. After all the presents were thrown on the shawl the maiden moved away and took another seat upon a shawl spread on the ground. The women then distributed the gifts among the bride's relatives. While the presents were being apportioned, the bridegroom made his appearance on the wedding ground. The male relatives of the bride greeted him and made short congrat-

²³Ibid., 133.

ulatory addresses, which consisted of some such statements, "In former days I called you my sister's son, now I am honored to call you my son-in-law." The bridegroom then went through the ritual of shaking hands with his relatives. Occasionally the female relatives of the bride said something to the bridegroom, but never to any of the other men.²⁴ After the congratulating was over it was time to eat. Everyone feasted until he was well satisfied. The feast was usually over about sundown, then the night long dance was started. The bridegroom usually did not look at his bride or go near her until they were ready to go home.

There was an unique old custom among the full-blood Choctaws that forbade the mother to look at her son-in-law. She could not look at him for years and sometimes never during an entire life time. When they talked to each other there had to be some kind of a screen between them. This old superstition caused the mother-in-law a lot of trouble during the time of immigration. Even in those sad and trying days many were afraid to raise their heads or open their eyes for fear of seeing the son-in-law.²⁵

To create excitement at the wedding the bride would sometimes run away and the bridegroom would pursue her. Some of the Choctaws thought the bride did not have much love for her suitor if she were easily caught. If the man had to put up a

²⁴Idem.

²⁵Ibid., 129.

hard race to catch his bride that was a sign of great love. In other communities the Choctaws thought that the maiden did not care for the man if she did her best to run away from him.²⁶ The life of a prospective bride was as uncertain then as now.

The Choctaw men and women usually became attached to each other during dances. The old folks watched the young people in order to keep close relatives from becoming attached to each other, so as to prevent inter-marriage. In this manner they were able to prevent marriages which they knew would weaken the national fiber. The women had to be between twenty and twenty-five years old and the men between twenty-five and thirty before they could marry. Tribal codes dictated they must wait this long so that their offspring would be large and strong.²⁷

The custom most commented on by the early writers was that of burial. At the time Hernando DeSoto went through the Choctaw country they wrapped the bodies of the dead in skins and placed them on scaffolds from six to fifteen feet high.²⁸ High benches were constructed and placed around the scaffold. Every day the immediate members of the family would seat themselves on the benches, cover their heads, and cry for an hour or more. The relatives of the family would sometimes also take part in the mourning. After some months when a sufficient number of corpses in the village or community had

²⁶Ibid., 128.

²⁷Swanton, op. cit., 136.

²⁸A. J. Pickett, History of Alabama, 129.

become so thoroughly putrified as to necessitate a general burial word was sent to the bone-pickers.²⁹

The bone-pickers were old men who let their finger nails grow long so that they might use them to remove the putrified flesh from the bones. There were bone-pickers in every village and community. When they received the news that their services were needed they held a general council. One from each village went to the council and there decided on the day when the bones from all quarters would reach the bone house. Messengers were sent with small bundles of split cane strips to every family. The sticks were used to measure time so that everyone would know the day of burial. Each family threw away one stick each morning. The morning they threw away the last stick was the day that everyone was to start to the bone house.³⁰

When the bone-pickers arrived at the house of the deceased the family and relatives seated themselves on mourning benches and went through their usual wailing and weeping. Then the benches were removed and the bone-picker went about his business. After preparing the coffin and removing the flesh from the bones, he washed them, and placed them in the coffin. The flesh was either buried or burned along with the scaffold.³¹

The bone-pickers worked one or more days at their respective tasks depending on the number of corpses. When the work

²⁹Bureau of American Ethnology, First Annual Report, (1879-1880), 169.

³⁰Swanton, op. cit., 187.

³¹Ibid., 188.

was finished a procession from each place was formed and the coffins were carried to the bone-house. On their arrival the coffins were placed on the ground and the mourners gathered around for one last wailing and weeping. When enough tears had been shed the coffins were placed in the bone house and everyone departed for their respective homes.³²

The custom of bone-picking probably continued longer in some communities than it did in others. In most communities it was abolished in the last days of the eighteenth century. The custom of placing the dead on scaffolds was abolished about 1800. The Choctaws then began burying their dead in a sitting posture in the grave.³³ It then became the business of the old bone-pickers to set red poles around the graves. They removed the poles after the last day of mourning. Instead of being called bone-pickers they now became known as "pole-setters" and "pole-pullers". With the change in burial procedure came also an improvement in social status for the Choctaw mortician.

During the last half of the nineteenth century all of the Choctaws took up a different custom of burying their dead. Under the new plan the two oldest men in the community were the officials that took care of the burials. They saw that the grave was dug and the poles prepared for the pole setting. Six poles were prepared, three for each side of the grave.

³²Bureau of American Ethnology, First Annual Report, (1879-1880), 168.

³³Bureau of American Ethnology, Forty-second Annual Report, (1924-1925), 397.

The middle one on each side was taller than the end ones. They were decorated with grapevine hoops and white streamers made out of cloth. The streamers were to show passers-by that it was a grave and they were expected to show respect for the dead by weeping a while over it.³⁴ The hoops were simply ornaments to the grave and had no special significance.

When everything had been made ready for the burial everyone moved to the grave which was usually near the house. Sometimes the grave was in the yard. The body was enclosed in a coffin and lowered into the grave. Many times the articles that the deceased valued most in life were placed in the grave. The grave was covered with earth and boards were sometimes placed on top. The six pole-setters planted three poles on each side of the grave. After the poles had been set everyone on the ground surrounded the grave and wailed for a long time, then left one by one for their homes.³⁴

In the period between the time of burial and the "last cry", or what was called by the Choctaws the "big cry", the family and the near relatives went to the grave each day to mourn. During this period the male relatives let their hair grow and the females went bare-footed. Neither sex wore any kind of ornament. They never participated in any kind of entertainment or loud talk during this time. During this period the two head men conferred with each other and appointed the expert

³⁴Swanton, op. cit., 191.

³⁵Ibid., 190.

hunters in the two groups to go and kill as many deer as possible to be barbecued for the "big cry". While this was going on the near relatives of the deceased met for the "little cry" and decided on the day for the "big cry". The two men sent a bundle of sticks to every family far and near notifying them of the coming event.³⁶

When the great day arrived Choctaws from every community began to make their appearance. Before speaking or doing anything they went to the grave and mourned for a time. After having discharged their duty to the dead they returned to the camping ground and made themselves comfortable for the coming event. Late in the afternoon the hunters deposited the barbecued venison. The two head men had the venison and hominy divided and distributed to the two groups. The two head men gave long orations. After the speeches were over every man, woman and child could eat as much as he wanted.³⁷

After having eaten, the Indians passed the time any way they liked. It was a pleasant social occasion and there was very little sleep in camp that night. The young men and women assembled on the dancing ground which had previously been prepared for the occasion. Six different dances were danced in succession. The first dance was a man's dance, danced by men alone. After the first dance the women selected a man to dance

³⁶Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-seventh Annual Report, (1905-1906), 495.

³⁷Bureau of American Ethnology, First Annual Report, (1879-1880), 186.

with them in each of five coming dances. A man could not refuse to dance when he was asked. He could not quit until the woman was ready to stop. The dances usually lasted until daylight.³⁸

When it was daylight the two head men told their people that it was time for the last cry over the dead. Everyone gathered around the grave. Each pole-puller stood near his pole. Everyone except the pole-pullers and the two head men kneeled, covered their heads and wept for a long time. While they were crying the two head men gave short orations about the departed friend. The pole-pullers removed the poles, carried them some distance from the grave and deposited them in a thicket or behind long. This ended the big cry and everyone returned home. The mourners resumed their usual dress and ornaments and took up their old customs of a free and easy life.³⁹

Down to about 1880, these old burial customs were followed in about every Choctaw community. One custom after another passed out of existence as the Choctaws became civilized. Education also played an important part in causing the Choctaws to break away from their primitive customs. Today the Choctaws of every Christianized community have their grave yards near their churches. They bury their dead as do the whites.⁴⁰

³⁸Swanton, op. cit., 193.

³⁹Ibid., 194-195.

⁴⁰Idem.

CHAPTER II

RELIGION

Long before a church building or a place of worship was built in their midst, the Indians knew that there was a spirit that looked after their daily needs. They might not express their faith in the form of public worship but they believed in the existence of a Supreme Being universally known among all Indians as the "Great Spirit" or the "Good Spirit".¹ They also believed that there existed an "Evil Spirit". For the latter, they felt the greatest fear and dread, and sought continually the aid of the Good Spirit in averting the influence of the Evil Spirit. To the Good Spirit they gave divine homage with a devotion that would "put to shame many of those who have lived a lifetime under the lights of the Gospel Dispensation with scarcely a devotional emotion."²

Every warrior had his totem, a little sack, filled with various ingredients and unique items of religious significance. The contents were a profound secret to all but the owner himself. No warrior desired to know the contents of another's totem. It was sacred to its possessor alone. Every warrior kept his totem on his person, for he believed that by it he would be able to secure the aid of the Good Spirit in warding

¹Abner R. Johnson, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, CVI, 178.

²H. B. Cushman, History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez Indians, 38.

off the base designs of the evil one. He sincerely believed that all misfortunes were caused by the Evil Spirit whenever he failed to secure the aid of the Good Spirit.³

To the Choctaws, as well as to all other Indians, the voice of the distant thunder that echoed from hill to hill, the roaring wind and the lightning flash that heralded the approaching storm, were but the voice of the Great Spirit, and they made them the themes that filled their souls with song and praise. The chiefs and famous warriors developed and solemnly narrated stories and legends about the Great Spirit as they sat around their camp fires, and these were handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.⁴ They heard the voice of the unseen Great Spirit throughout all of nature. To them nature spoke in a language most powerful. They never sought communion through prayer with the Great Spirit because they believed that it ruled only in this life. Though their ideas of future rewards and punishments beyond the tomb were feeble and confused,⁵ they never seriously doubted the fact of immortality and their future existence in another world.

The Indians believed that their life or soul would find a resting place somewhere beyond the grave. Since the principal interests of the men were hunting and fishing, they believed that after death they would return to the "Great Spirit World" or the "Happy Hunting Ground". This conviction caused them to

³Ibid., 39.

⁴Johnson, op. cit., 179.

⁵Cushman, op. cit., 117.

request that their bows and arrows be placed in their graves after death.⁶

The Indian woman believed that letting her hair grow long and beautiful was an honor to her and would assist her in getting into the next world. She always asked that after her death her best dress be placed in the grave so that she might change when she visited her loved ones who had preceded her in death.⁷

The Choctaws believed that there was a place of punishment for those who had so lived that they could not enter the "Happy Hunting Ground." It was a land full of briers, thorns, and every kind of prickly plants which would inflict deep cuts and cause intense pain for which there was no relief. They believed that the "Happy Hunting Ground" and the land of torment were several days journey apart.⁸

It seemed that in ancient times the Choctaws regarded the sun as a deity. The sun was thought to have power over life and death. He was represented as looking down upon the earth, and so long as he kept his flaming eye fixed on one, that person was safe, but when he turned away his eye, the individual died. To the sun the tribesmen attributed their success in war. Before the warriors went to battle they sang a war song in which the sun was mentioned and honored. They thought that

⁶Pete W. Cole, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XX, 236.

⁷Ibid., 237.

⁸John R. Swanton, "The Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 103, p. 195.

fire was the sun's representative on earth, and that the fire-spirit was in constant contact with the sun and acted as his informant. They believed that when one did something wrong in the presence of fire the sun was sure to learn of the deed.⁹

Even though the Choctaws did believe in the Great Spirit before the coming of the missionaries, from the beginning they were usually willing to listen to the teaching of the white man. However, the Choctaws of Mississippi were not ready to accept the white man's religion when the French first came into their country. The French Jesuit Missionaries sought in vain to convert them to Christianity. When the English first took the country from the French they found chapels that had been constructed by the Jesuits. The Choctaws used the chapels to amuse their friends by going through the Catholic ceremonies mimicking the priest with surprising exactness.¹⁰

The first Protestant Missionaries, who arrived in the Choctaw country in 1818, were sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions following a request made by the Choctaws for missionaries. The civilizing and Christianizing influence of the first missionaries did much for the development of the people. The missionaries were almost without exception capable and good men, and the Choctaws who became Christians were sincere and faithful.¹¹ At first, the mission

⁹Ibid., 196.

¹⁰A. J. Pickett, History of Alabama, 132.

¹¹Report of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1871, 569.

work was carried on by the Presbyterians and Methodists, but it was not long before the Baptists, too, had their missionaries among the Choctaws. The men whose mission it was to teach and preach to the Indians did not fail them when the time came for the removal to Indian Territory. They went along, suffered the same hardships, and continued the same good work they had started in the old Choctaw country.¹²

The Indians, with a great eagerness for knowledge, flocked together to listen to missionaries bringing them word of a God that was entirely new to them. The Choctaws accepted Christianity with apparent eagerness, yet they did not think of giving up all of their ancient rites, superstitions, and customs. It is interesting to note that as late as 1834 the Choctaws still put to death persons accused of witchcraft. In that year strict laws were passed by the Choctaw Council prohibiting this practice.¹³

In the early part of 1832, a band of about six hundred Choctaws moved from Mississippi to the southeastern part of Indian Territory. With this group came the first missionary to the new Choctaw country, Reverend Alfred Wright, who had a well-organized station in Mississippi but chose to work with those in the new land. Reverend Wright conducted the first church meeting in the new Choctaw homeland in December, 1832. Thirty persons were received into the church from those who

¹²Idem.

¹³Edward E. Dale and Jessie Lee Rader, Readings in Oklahoma History, 128.

had been church members in Mississippi, and seven others were added on profession of faith. As a result of this meeting the first church was organized in this southern section of Indian Territory. It was given the name of Wheelock in honor of the first president of Dartmouth College. The first permanent building was constructed on the site in 1846. It was constructed of native stone under the supervision of Reverend Wright and still stands today as the oldest church building in Oklahoma.¹⁴ The mission at Wheelock was purely a religious organization at the beginning, but shortly after its establishment a school was started as a component part.¹⁵

As more and more Choctaws moved to their new homes the number of missionaries in Indian Territory increased. Missionary activity extended until the whole Choctaw nation was reached by schools and preaching stations. By the time of the opening of the Civil War the Choctaws were a Christian Nation, in the popular sense of the term. From one-fifth to one-fourth of the total population was connected with the different churches. The Sabbath was observed as elsewhere in the nation, and the sessions of the General Council were uniformly opened and closed with prayer.¹⁶

¹⁴Allen Wright, "Wheelock Seminary", Chronicles of Oklahoma, I, (No. 2, 1921), 117.

¹⁵Ibid., 118.

¹⁶W. B. Morrison, "The Choctaw Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions", Chronicles of Oklahoma, IV, (No. 2, 1926), 180.

Following the Civil War the number of missionaries among the Choctaws was too small to provide religious instruction for all of the people. As a result most of the work had to be carried on by the native preachers, who were directed by a few missionaries.¹⁷ These men were usually traveling preachers who traveled from one church to another to carry religious instruction to all of the people. The buildings in which they held services were usually one room log shacks. The seats were hewed logs, without backs, certainly not well adapted to sleepy Christians.¹⁸

The life of a circuit riding preacher in the Choctaw Nation was definitely not the most desirable. When he was on his travels he always carried his blankets, his provisions, a cup, matches, and a rope with which to "stake out" his pony. He might be fortunate enough to find a bed beneath some friendly roof, but he was more likely to be compelled to wrap his blankets about himself and lie down beneath the shelter of the forest oaks and enjoy the luxury of sleeping in the open air. During rainy and extremely cold weather the oaks did not furnish the desired shelter. Then these men of God were most happy to have the privilege of sleeping under the roof of a corn crib.¹⁹

The circuit riding preachers held meetings at different

¹⁷Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1876, 64.

¹⁸Ibid., 63.

¹⁹J. Y. Bryce, "Death of Oak-Chi-Ah, A Missionary", Chronicles of Oklahoma, IV, (No. 2, 1926), 199.

churches every Sunday. The Choctaws knew in advance when the preacher would be in their community and began gathering at the church house on Saturday afternoons in order to be ready for the Sabbath services. In some cases several hundred people turned out for these "Big Meetings", as they were called by the Choctaws. The men, women, and children all dressed in their gayest clothes. The men wore calico hunting shirts trimmed with fringe and rosettes, and hats with two or three different colors of ribbons on them. The women wore bright bandannas or sunbonnets. Many of them walked several miles with a baby in their arms or bound upon their backs with a shawl.²⁰

On Sunday morning the woods surrounding the church would be filled with groups of people, dogs, horses and wagons. When it was time for the services to begin the people were called to the church by the sound from a cow horn that was blown by the minister or some one appointed by him. Inside the building the men and women sat on opposite sides of the building, never together. When the morning services were over and the preacher had given the benediction, the people then went to the graveyard, which was usually near by, to perform the ritual of the funeral cry for those who had died since the last meeting.²¹ After they had cried for a while they returned to their camp

²⁰Anna Lewis, (ed.) "Diary of A Missionary to the Choctaws," Chronicles of Oklahoma, XVII, (No. 4, 1939), 433.

²¹Francis Jane Ferrier, "Reminiscences," Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XXIV, 196.

in the woods to prepare the midday meal, or to return to their homes if there was not going to be an evening service. Many people did not return to their homes until Monday morning when there was a Sunday evening service.²²

The Choctaws as a tribe, took their religion seriously, a lot more so than many people of today. The fullblood Choctaws were more serious than were the mixed bloods. At their meetings no one talked except the preacher. The religious fullbloods who lived in the vicinity of a church where Sunday school was held made sure that their family attended every Sunday. No cooking or work of any kind was done on the Sabbath. All food that was to be consumed on Sunday was prepared on Saturday. Sunday afternoons and evenings were spent in Bible readings. The children did not dare go to sleep before the evening prayer was offered.²³ Some of these very religious families did not allow their children to attend any type of social event unless it was connected with the church. Some children grew up in areas where Indian ball games and dances were held, but they were never allowed to attend them until they were grown.²⁴

A few Choctaws believed in the white man's religion, but did not bother to join the church until they became seriously

²²Lewis, op. cit., 434.

²³Ethel H. Carter, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XIX, 212.

²⁴Ibid., 212.

ill. Then they sent for the preacher to come to their house to baptize them. Regardless of sickness or inclement weather they were usually taken, after they had professed their faith, to the creek and baptized.²⁵

Some time during every summer the Choctaws held a big camp meeting. Usually there were union meetings made up of Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. These gatherings lasted from ten to twenty days. Services were held out in the open, and it was permissible for the men to smoke during the services. It was thought that a man with a pipe in his mouth was better prepared to listen, tobacco apparently producing a contemplative attitude. Between the sermons of these big meetings, funeral cries were held for those that had died since the last summer's gathering.²⁶

Every family had a number of dogs that always accompanied it to the summer camp. As a result there were almost as many dogs as there were people. At every service some of the people had to take the responsibility of keeping the dogs out of the meeting. Occasionally the preacher was forced to stop in the middle of his sermon, while someone broke up a dog fight that was causing so much noise that people couldn't hear what was being said.²⁷

²⁵James Wilson Baird, "Reminiscences," Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XIII, 133.

²⁶Sopia Hibben Payne, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XC, 152.

²⁷Ferrier, op. cit., 196.

Great quantities of food was consumed at these protracted meetings. The menu consisted principally of beef, pork, yams, cornbread, coffee and always tom-ful-la, which is boiled crushed corn. All of the cooking was done out on the ground; beeves were killed and barbecued; and whole hams were boiled in large kettles. Again it was a major task to keep the hungry dogs away.²⁸

New hats and new dresses were always in evidence at the annual meetings, for this was a social occasion as well. It was the only time of the year when people saw some of their relatives. They naturally wanted their relatives to see them looking their best. New clothes didn't matter the balance of the year. A girl might wear a new dress all summer without washing it, but for this gathering clothes were important.²⁹

The new clothes and the bountiful supply of food did not relegate to the background the religious spirit in the camp meetings. Every sermon was well attended, and each summer new members were added to the churches. These annual meetings, as well as the circuit system ministers, continued to play important roles in the religious life of the Choctaws for several years after Indian Territory became a part of the state of Oklahoma.

²⁸McGee Woods, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XIII, 125.

²⁹Payne, op. cit., 153.

CHAPTER III
CHOCTAW EDUCATION

Our earliest authorities provide very little information on the subject of education among the primitive Choctaws. There seems to have been no type of formal teaching. The mother exercised authority only over the girls and was not permitted to correct the boys in any manner. The oldest maternal uncle, or if he were dead, the oldest male relative in that line performed the duty of providing the boys with such little formal instruction as they received. At a very early age boys were taught the use of the blow gun and the bow and arrow. They were lectured by the old men on the manners and traditions of their ancestors. They were instructed to regard as a sacred duty the transmission to their posterity of the lessons thus acquired.¹

From all of the early accounts there appears to have been but little restraint, parental or otherwise, placed upon the children. They were never beaten or rudely chastised. The Indian plan of teaching their children tended to elevate rather than depress the mind. For deeds that were good, proper, and honorable in themselves the children were highly complimented, not only by their parents but by all who knew them. After misdeeds the parents merely commented on how much they were grieved

¹John R. Swanton, "The Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 103, p. 124.

because their children would misbehave.²

One would naturally infer that these boys, ignorant of almost all restraint from youth to manhood, would have been a set of desperadoes, indulging in every vice and crime. That was not the case at all. Perhaps no race of young people ever grew into manhood who were of a more restrained nature and peaceful disposition than the youths of the Old Mississippi Choctaws. They seldom quarreled among themselves in boyhood and even less when they reached manhood. To them in youth as well as in advanced years the dearest of all their earthly possessions was that of unrestrained freedom. Yet, though untrammelled by moral restraint, there existed in their own breasts a restraining influence that kept them within the bounds of prudence and reason.³

When the white settlers started moving into the Indian country the Choctaws began to realize that they needed something in the way of formal education for their youth. The old people knew that they themselves were ignorant and expected to die that way, but they wanted better things for their children.⁴

Schools were first established among the Cherokees by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1817. Soon afterwards, the Choctaws petitioned the American Board to

² B. B. Thatcher, Indian Traits, 147.

³ Swanton, op. cit., 126.

⁴ W. B. Morrison, "The Choctaw Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions", Chronicles of Oklahoma, IV, (No. 2, 1926), 171.

send missionaries to them. In making their request they stated that it was their desire to have their children taught the better way of life which was found in the "White Man's Book". They further stated that the Choctaws were just as worthy of attention as were the Cherokees and that they had always been at peace with the whites.⁵

In 1818 Cyrus Kingsbury was sent by the American Board to the Choctaw country in Mississippi. Within fourteen months after the arrival of Mr. Kingsbury, a school house, dormitories, and other dwellings for the school were constructed. The school opened with ten pupils. By the end of the first year sixty were in attendance, which represented a considerable increase considering the newness of the school.

The children were brought to the school and kept for the entire school year. They were provided with the rudiments of education in both their own language and in English. All of the necessities were furnished the pupils, but they were expected to work a portion of each day and were to submit to reasonable discipline as directed by the missionaries.⁶

For children who had always been allowed full freedom, with little restraint from their parents or elders, it was difficult for them to adhere to this system. Mr. Kingsbury had some difficulties in maintaining this system as shown from an address that he made to the Choctaw Council in 1822. In this

⁵Idem.

⁶Ibid., 172.

address he insisted that parents must not take their children out of school until the end of the term, that they must allow the missionaries to correct the pupils, and that parents should make their visits to the school brief.⁷

When the Choctaws learned that the missionaries were receiving no salary and that the American Board and the United States Government was contributing more than half of the support for their schools, they gave Mr. Kingsbury and the missionaries more assistance. They requested that missions under the direction of Mr. Kingsbury be extended as rapidly as possible. By 1825, the mission contained three main stations, each with a number of substations and schools. All of the Choctaw nation was being reached to some extent by these mission schools.⁸

After the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek the Choctaws were convinced that they would have to move to the new land beyond the great river. They knew that the education of their youth must continue in their new land, so they sent urgent and pathetic appeals to the American Board asking that the missionaries be permitted to accompany them to their new homes.⁹

The government of the United States did not fail to encourage the establishment of schools in all of the Indian nations. Funds were provided and teachers employed under the

⁷Ibid., 172.

⁸Ibid., 174.

⁹H. C. Benson, Life Among the Choctaw Indians, 36.

direction of Indian agents. Even with government encouragement many parents were not eager to send their children to school. However, some children within the vicinity of every school were taught the English language and to read and write.

In 1820, the Choctaws made appropriations for churches and schools to the sum of six thousand dollars annually, to run for a period of sixteen years. This appropriation was made from the annuities which they were to receive from the United States government for large tracts of land sold to the government.¹⁰

The first important school to provide advanced training founded for the exclusive benefit of the Indians and sustained by their own funds, was the Choctaw Academy. The Choctaws made an agreement with Colonel Richard Menton Johnson, by which he established the academy for boys at a site which they selected in Kentucky. This school was designed specifically to benefit the Choctaws, but it accepted pupils from other tribes that were willing to contribute the necessary funds for its support. The Choctaws supported this institution enthusiastically from the entrance of the first twenty-five boys in the fall of 1825 until the fall of 1841. During its existence many of the future leaders of the nation were trained there.¹¹

In 1841 after much deliberation among the leaders of the Choctaws, funds were withdrawn from the academy and it was disbanded. The people had decided that their children and young

¹⁰H. B. Cushman, History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez Indians, 140.

¹¹Angie Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, 145.

people should be educated nearer home. They felt that seminaries should be established in the Choctaw nation, so that adults might profit from the example and teaching of those who were employed to educate their sons and daughters.¹²

As soon as the Choctaws established their homes in the new country they began to build their school system. The initiative was taken by the missionaries of the American Board who in 1836 reported eleven schools with an enrollment of two hundred twenty-eight Choctaw children.¹³ These schools taught by the missionaries prepared the Choctaws for the introduction of a general school system--a system adapted to their needs.

At the time the government bought their land in Mississippi a school fund was created. Provisions were made for a number of schools to be located at certain heavily populated and accessible points in the nation, the schools to be free to all who would attend.¹⁴

The teachers were generally competent, but it was found exceedingly difficult to teach the pupils the English language while they were living at home and conversing only in their native dialect.¹⁵ Some schools used only books written in Choctaw. However, these were primarily designed for grown people who were not able to converse in English, and who were

¹²Benson, op. cit., 39.

¹³Debo, op. cit., 60.

¹⁴Benson, op. cit., 40.

¹⁵Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1870, 294.

anxious to read the few books that had been translated and published in their own language.

The greatest step forward in Choctaw education was taken in 1842, only nine years after their removal, when the national council provided for a comprehensive system of schools. Day or neighborhood schools were rapidly established in the various communities. At first these were the result of local enterprise or missionary encouragement, but they were eventually supported by public appropriations. However, they received nothing like a proportionate share of the legislative appropriations. They were often badly taught and irregularly attended. These neighborhood schools were apparently as good as those of the surrounding states, but still they were the weakest part of the Choctaw educational system.¹⁶

Much of the poor attendance at the neighborhood schools was due to the distance that children had to travel going to and from school. Some children had to ride horseback to school as many as six and seven miles. Often they were kept from returning to their homes by high water. Then the teachers had the duty of providing food and shelter until the water subsided.¹⁷ Of course, they could be sure of the children attending school as long as they were forced to board them.

The buildings in which the neighborhood schools were taught left much to be desired by those who were hired to nurture the

¹⁶Debo, op. cit., 61.

¹⁷Rosa Connor, "Reminiscence," Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection. II, 251.

young minds of the children in the Choctaw nation. The Buildings were constructed of native lumber or logs. Some of them were of the slab type. Many had only dirt floors with a fire place at one end of the building to provide heat during the winter months. In localities where the patrons were industrious enough to provide flooring for the building, it was of native pine lumber and unfinished. This unfinished wood provided a good supply of splinters to get into the bare feet of the children. Many times it became necessary for the teacher to take time from classes to remove splinters.¹⁸ The windows in the buildings were nothing more than holes sawed out of the logs or boards. In winter these holes were covered with pieces of lumber to keep out the cold.

The furnishings for these neighborhood schools was just as rough as were the buildings. The seats were split logs that had been made as smooth as possible with an ax. These split logs had small round poles set into them for legs. There were no backs to the seats. Very few children had slates on which to write. The drinking fountain was nothing more than a water bucket with a gourd dipper placed on a rough bench in one corner of the room. The drinking water was carried from a nearby spring or creek.¹⁹

Reading, writing, and arithmetic were the principal sub-

¹⁸William Cooke, "Reminiscence," Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, II, 251.

¹⁹Mathew Maytubbie, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XXIV, 329.

jects taught.²⁰ Most of the teaching and learning was done by the rote method, that is, the method whereby the teacher said the things that the pupils were to learn and they repeated after him until they memorized the material. This method was necessary in some cases due to lack of books. The children were required to stand while they recited their lessons.²¹

Due to the missionary influence the neighborhood schools opened each morning with the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the singing of hymns. Fridays were the school days that the pupils as well as the patrons enjoyed. On Friday afternoon spelling contests were held. Occasionally there were other contests as well, but the main event was the spelling contest. At times the contests would be held on Friday night and the whole community would be invited.²² Ordinarily the visitors did not take part in the contests but they always enjoyed seeing their children participate. There can be no doubt that the parents gained something in the way of an education through their attending social events sponsored and directed by the teachers of the neighborhood schools. A great number of the teachers of these schools were full-blood Choctaws who had received their training in the Choctaw Academy in

²⁰ Pete Cole, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, XX, 243.

²¹ Maytubbie, *op. cit.*, 329.

²² *Ibid.*, 330.

Kentucky.²³

Provisions were made for adult education through the Sunday schools. This project was initiated by the missionaries, but soon was supported by appropriations made by the council. Whole families came and camped near the school house, attended school on Saturday and Sunday and received instruction in arithmetic, reading, and writing in the Choctaw language. The Choctaws experienced little difficulty in learning to read. Before they had been in their new homes for a generation they became, at least as far as their native language was concerned, a literate people.²⁴

The Choctaw academies formed the strongest and most important part of the educational system of the nation. They received the greater proportion of the appropriations for schools and were directed by some of the best educated men of the nation. During the period from 1841 to 1843, the council appropriated funds for the building of three academies for boys and six for girls.²⁵ By 1848, these nine boarding schools were finished and being supported by tribal fund. These schools usually operated under a contract with the mission board, which furnished the teachers and paid their salaries.²⁶

²³Charles Jefferson, "Reminiscences," Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, V, 342.

²⁴Angie Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, 62.

²⁵Cole, op. cit., 244.

²⁶Debo, op. cit., 62.

Some of the earliest boarding schools in the Choctaw nation were constructed and maintained by the missionaries out of their own funds. They appointed only educated men and women as teachers, thereby keeping high standards in their schools. One of the earliest mission schools established in Indian Territory was Wheelock Academy, founded in 1832. The work offered in this school was considered a model for the education of girls in Indian Territory. In 1842, the school was given a special appropriation by the Choctaw council.²⁷ In 1846 the New Hope Academy was opened for girls.²⁸ The school program in this academy was about the same as that for Wheelock. In fact, there was very little difference in the type of training carried out in the various girls' schools.

The girls who attended these academies were boarded there for the entire school term. The missionaries exercised general supervision over the procedure and activities within the academies. The superintendent offered prayer each morning at the breakfast table. The students themselves performed all of the duties of housekeeping, including cooking, laundering, housekeeping and sewing. One class was assigned for a specific period to each of these duties, and the duties were periodically reassigned to different classes. In this manner students were taught by actual performance all of the duties pertaining to good housekeeping. These chores were performed before and

²⁷Cole, op. cit., 246.

²⁸Debo, op. cit., 61.

after the regular school hours.²⁹ Most of the common school subjects that one finds being taught in the present-day high school were offered in the Choctaw National Academies.

There were no formal classes on Saturday at the girls' academies. Saturday morning was spent in a general cleaning of the building and grounds. The afternoon might be spent playing or in any type of leisure-time activity except by those who had special housekeeping duties to perform. However, each Saturday would find different ones doing these duties. Sunday was strictly a day of worship. The morning was devoted to Sunday School and church. The afternoon was spent in hymn singing and other types of religious worship.³⁰

When New Hope Seminary opened in 1846 the school plant consisted of two frame buildings one hundred feet long with broad piazzas on each side. The structures were rather crude and unpainted inside and out. However, these were later replaced by native stone buildings. The first buildings were divided into dormitories, class rooms, dining rooms and kitchen. The rooms were heated by open stoves that gave out a lot of smoke and little heat.³¹

The buildings were enclosed within a two acre square tract of land. Surrounding this tract was a high picket fence. All

²⁹Susan Gregory Powell, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, LXXXIII, 391.

³⁰Ibid., 391.

³¹Carolyn Thomas Forman, "New Hope Seminary", Chronicles of Oklahoma, XXII, (No. 3, 1934), 171.

of the trees, vines and wild flowers were left undisturbed inside the fence.³²

Six or seven acres of land, attached to the academy, were cultivated to supply food for the girls. The girls were not expected to cultivate the land but they rendered service to the neighboring boys' schools by making trousers, shirts, and socks. The boys, in turn, helped the girls by supplying a part of the vegetables, corn and wheat. The boys also supplied firewood for the girls' academy. Wood cutting days were looked forward to by both boys and girls. On those days the girls prepared and served the lunch to the wood cutters. Only on these days were boys allowed inside the fence of the academy unless they had a sister in the school, whom they might visit.³³

The New Hope Seminary was one of the leading institutions for the training of the Choctaw girls from 1846, the year that it opened, until 1897, when it was destroyed by fire. It was never rebuilt. This was the fate of a number of the Choctaw academies. Wheelock Academy, the first to be established for girls, is, however, still in existence.

Choctaw academies for boys were established in Indian Territory at the same time as were those for girls. In fact, Spencer Academy was established and maintained by the National Council before the latter made any appropriations for girls' institutions. Spencer Academy opened in 1844 and Armstrong

³²Ibid., 273.

³³Ibid., 275.

Academy in 1845. The latter was established by the Baptist Mission, but it soon became a tribal school.³⁴

Spencer Academy was considered to be the leading boys' school in the Choctaw Nation. It was supported by a fund of six thousand dollars appropriated annually by the Choctaw National Council. This together with some other funds gave the school between eight and nine thousand dollars with which to operate each year.³⁵

In these boys' institutions all of the common school subjects were taught, and in addition the advanced students studied natural philosophy, algebra, astronomy, Greek and Latin. They were also taught reading, spelling and arithmetic in their own language in order that they would be able to read their tribal laws, religious literature, and newspapers that were printed in their native language.³⁶

As early as 1847 the Choctaw Council passed a law authorizing the school trustees to select and send some of the Choctaw boys to the better colleges in the United States. This was done in order to make it possible for some to obtain a higher education than that which the academies could offer. Several boys took advantage of this opportunity. Their expenses were paid from funds appropriated for this purpose by

³⁴Victor M. Locke, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, CIX, 343.

³⁵J. Y. Bryce, "About Some of Our First Schools in the Choctaw Nation," Chronicles of Oklahoma, VI (No. 3, 1928), 357.

³⁶Cole, op. cit., 244.

the council.³⁷

In addition to academic training the boys received instruction in practical subjects. They were taught agriculture, manual training, blacksmithing and dairying. There was great need for men trained in each of these vocations in every community.³⁸

There was a farm attached to these boarding schools that produced a large portion of what was consumed at each institution. By 1889, Spencer Academy was practically self-supporting. Garden vegetables, corn, wheat, chickens, cattle, and hogs were produced on the farm.³⁹ The greatest economy was practiced, though everything that was necessary was procured for the school. Such produce from the farm as was not needed by the school was sold and the profits added to the school fund, thereby making it possible to provide opportunities for an increased enrollment.⁴⁰

The boys who attended the academies spent the entire school term at the institution. All necessary supplies, food and clothing were furnished. There was a high fence around the school ground and the boys did not dare climb it without permission. They were expected to go to bed at nine o'clock

³⁷ Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1869, 410.

³⁸ Locke, op. cit., 343.

³⁹ J. Norman Leard, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, LXXVIII, 224.

⁴⁰ Bryce, op. cit., 358.

each night. There were no fires in the sleeping quarters and the only light was an oil lamp that hung in the hall.⁴¹

There were always chores to be performed by the boys before and after school hours. Saturday mornings were spent in work. In addition to the daily chores there was a general cleaning of the buildings and grounds. If all of the work was finished during the morning hours the afternoons were spent in sports. Usually some type of a ball game was played. During the summer months swimming was the principal Saturday afternoon sport. Sundays were observed by religious worship, the morning being spent in Sunday School and church services. Much of the afternoon was spent singing, which was enjoyed by most of the boys.⁴²

During the Civil War the Choctaw academies were closed due to the unstable conditions within the nation. However, the Choctaws believed in education, they were proud of their civilization which they regarded as the product of their schools. As a result they reopened their schools as soon as conditions would permit after the war. The boys' academy at Spencer and the girls' at New Hope were the first of the boarding schools to be reopened.⁴³

In this post-war period, a more extensive system of

⁴¹Ben J. McPherson, "Reminiscences", Indian Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, LXXI, 219.

⁴²Cole, op. cit., 246.

⁴³Angie Debo, "Education in the Choctaw Country After the Civil War," Chronicles of Oklahoma, X, (No. 3, 1932), 183.

administration was launched. The entire educational system was placed under the control of a board of trustees consisting of a superintendent and one trustee from each of the three districts into which the nation was divided. These officials were elected for a term of two years by a joint ballot of both houses of the council. They exercised a supervisory control over the neighborhood schools and boarding schools. They also selected the students who were to be maintained in boarding schools and colleges at public expense. In 1890 the board of trustees was reorganized. The principal chief was made a member, and name was changed to Board of Education of the Choctaw nation.⁴⁴

Each district trustee established neighborhood schools in his district at the request of the local community, which was to provide the building and equipment. Local trustees were appointed, whose duty it was to select the teacher, encourage attendance and reinforce the authority of the teacher.⁴⁵

In 1884, the National Council passed a compulsory school attendance law, which provided for the penalizing of the parents by a fine of five or ten cents per day for the absence of each child between the ages of seven and eighteen when the absence could not be excused by bad weather, high water, or sickness.⁴⁶

The financial conditions of the schools were deplorable

⁴⁴Ibid., 184.

⁴⁵Ibid., 185.

⁴⁶Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1887, 106.

in 1870. Some districts showed a deficit and could not account for some of the money spent. The principal chief was directed by the council to appoint two competent persons to investigate the expenditures.⁴⁷ In the same year the council directed the board of trustees to contract with the Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist Mission boards to conduct the work at Spencer and New Hope Academies. The Presbyterians took control of Spencer, while the Methodists took charge of New Hope. The council became dissatisfied with the mission management in 1885 and after a period of experimentation the two schools were placed under the control of the board of trustees. The two schools continued to be the two leading educational institutions of the Choctaws until they were destroyed by fire. In 1896, Spencer burned and four boys lost their lives in the fire. New Hope was destroyed in the same manner just a few months later.⁴⁸

The entire Choctaw school system was supported by the annuities, the income from invested funds, the royalties and the permit taxes. The Choctaw people never paid school taxes, except that they voted at an early date to apply to the support of education the annuities that had formerly been paid to the individuals for land sold to the United States government.⁴⁹

As a result of their excellent public school system the

⁴⁷W. J. Fessler, "Work of the Choctaw Legislature," Chronicles of Oklahoma, VI, (No. 1, 1929), 63.

⁴⁸Angie Debo, The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, 238.

⁴⁹Ibid., 242.

Choctaws had a higher proportion of educated people than did some of the neighboring states. A large number of them had college degrees, due to the fact that the people with wealth had sent their children to attend colleges in the various states.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Ibid., 240.

CHAPTER IV

RECREATION

The Choctaws were more active in recreational and social activities than were most other Indian tribes. The men were slender in form and very active. Few could excel them in the ball games or in running races. Both sexes were sturdy and well built, and the features of the females were pleasingly proportioned. The women were also quite eager and enthusiastic participants in the various tribal ball games.¹

For the Choctaws, as well as most of the southeastern Indians, ball playing was their chief and most loved game. The games were usually scheduled a long time in advance, and runners were sent over the country with bundles of sticks for each family to use in calculating the date. During the intervening time between the day of the challenge and that of the contest, great preparations were made on both sides by those who intended to engage in the games.²

In some cases the time between the date of challenge and the date of the contest was short. If the warriors of the same village became bored with the monotony of every day life, and desired a change that would break the routine, they sent a challenge to the men of another village or county to engage in a ball game. A challenge was rarely declined. A date was

¹A. J. Pickett, The History of Alabama, 125.

²John R. Swanton, "Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaws", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 103, p. 144.

set that was agreeable to both parties and a suitable playing site was selected.³

In most cases the challenging party prepared the field for play. The ball ground was laid out on a level plain. Near the center of the plain two goals were set up, from two to three hundred yards apart. The goals were constructed of two split logs about twenty-five feet long. These were set in the ground about six feet apart and tied together at the top with a small pole. The split sides of the logs were turned toward the playing field. In scoring points it was necessary for the ball to hit the flat surface of the goal posts. At a point half-way between the goals a small pole was driven into the ground. From this point the ball was thrown into the air when the game was ready to start and after each goal was made.⁴

A ball and ball sticks were the only equipment necessary in playing the game. Each player had his own ball sticks and the ball was usually furnished by the challengers. It was necessary to have several balls on hand because they were often lost in the high grass that nearly always covered the ball ground. The balls were made out of pieces of scrap deer skin, moistened and stuffed hard with deer's hair, and strongly sewn with deer's sinews. The ball sticks were usually made from hickory or chestnut wood. They were about two feet long with an oblong hoop on one end. The hoop was laced with deer

³Idem.

⁴Swanton, op. cit., 148.

skin thongs to form a kind of a pocket in which to catch the ball. The players were not allowed to touch the ball with their hands.⁵

The number of players that participated in a game varied from sixty to six or eight hundred. However, the usual number was sixty or eighty, with thirty or forty on each side. Each team had a manager who was usually some old warrior who could no longer take part in the actual play. Each team also had a medicine man. These two pitted their magic and charm against each other, thus, striving to bring the unseen forces to the assistance of their party. During the game they worked almost as hard as the players, frantically invoking the powers of magic.⁶

During the two or three days preceding the contest, scores of Indians from every point on the compass made their way toward the ball-ground. The night before the game found all of the players and their friends on the ball ground. Members of each party made their camp near their respective goals. Usually the game was held at a time when the moon was full and the weather was warm enough so that camp could be made on the ground in the open. Due to the excitement and the dances which accompanied the affair there was little sleep and not much need for a place to sleep.⁷

⁵Swanton, op. cit., 148.

⁶Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-fourth Annual Report, (1902-1903), 598.

⁷Swanton, op. cit., 144.

The players wore their ball-play costume from the time they reached the playing ground until they returned home. The costume consisted of breech cloth with a raccoon tail that stuck straight up along their spine, or a horse's tail that draped over the breech cloth behind. All of this was attached to a leather belt or strap. The men might bring their weapons to the ball game, but were not allowed to wear them on the field.⁸

Soon after dark, on the night preceding the day of play, the ballgame dance started. Each party danced around their respective goal posts. The players danced in their costumes with their ball sticks in their hands. The players danced, shouted and clashed their ball sticks above their heads for about fifteen minutes. While they were dancing the women formed two parallel lines facing each other. When the players stopped dancing the women danced and chanted a song in a low tone, keeping time with their feet. After the women had chanted the song several times the players danced again. This same dance was repeated in exactly the same manner practically all night.⁹

The first few hours following breakfast were spent in making bets. Most of the people placed bets on the outcome of the game, but the greatest amount of betting was done by the women. Skins, furs, trinkets, and every imaginable thing that

⁸Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-fourth Annual Report, (1902-1903), 603.

⁹Swanton, op. cit., 149.

was a part of their wealth was staked on the outcome of the game. The parties betting articles with each other, tied the articles together and deposited them with the stake-holders. The articles were given to the winner by the stake-holder when the game was over. The losers often went home wearing very little clothing due to the fact that they had bet their boots and other articles of clothing.¹⁰ Many a Choctaw literally "lost his shirt."

After all bets were made the team managers arranged their men on the field. The best players on each team were stationed near the opponent's goal because this was where the play generally was most violent. The remainder of the players were arranged near the center of the playing field. When all of the players were in position one of the team managers threw the ball high into the air. The moment the ball was seen in the air the players on both teams rushed to the place where the ball would likely fall. Each one attempting to catch the ball with his ball sticks in order to throw it in the direction of his team's goal. The one who caught the ball could run with it if he could evade his opponents. There were no rules governing the manner of play, so the players pushed, pulled, tripped and ran over each other in their excitement and reckless chase for the ball.¹¹ In the struggle for the ball every method was used that could be devised to oppose the progress

¹⁰Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-fourth Annual Report, (1902-1903), 603.

¹¹Swanton, op. cit., 146.

of the man who was likely to get the ball. These obstructions often met with desperate individual resistance which terminated in a violent scuffle, and sometimes in fights. Often legs or arms were broken and shoulders dislocated. Fights usually did not last long because the old men who managed the game acted as mediators. They considered the game as recreation and not something over which to fight.¹²

Scores were counted when the ball was thrown against the flat side of one of the goal posts. After each goal was made the ball was taken back to the center of the field and thrown into the air again, usually by the manager of the team that had just scored. Each goal counted one point. The opposing parties agreed on the number of points that a team must make in order to win. In most games twelve points were set as the limit, but in some cases the required number of points was as high as one hundred.¹³

The women were extremely active in aiding the players of their party while the game was in progress. They were not permitted to touch the ball, or ball sticks, but carried hot coffee or water to the thirsty and offered words of encouragement. Some of them carried long switches which they used to whip players who appeared not to be working hard.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., 140.

¹³Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-fourth Annual Report, (1902-1903), 602.

¹⁴Ibid., 604.

When the game was finished the vanquished usually accepted their defeat cheerfully. Poor sportsmanship was not unknown but it was unusual.¹⁵ The winners went to the stake-holders to receive the articles they won through their wagers, then they all separated and returned to their homes.

When there was not a ball game being played on which the Choctaws could gamble, they played a game called "Chunkey." This game was played with two poles and a circular stone about six inches in diameter.¹⁶ To play the game an oblong piece of ground was well cleaned and sprinkled over with sand. The two players stood about eighteen feet from one end of the playing ground. Each held in his hand a pole about eight feet long, smooth and tapered at one end with a flat point. When the players were ready to begin play they started running toward the playing ground. Just as they reached the edge of the area of play the one with the stone hurled it toward the center of the area. As the stone rolled along the ground the two men threw their poles at it. When the stone stopped rolling the players measured the distance between the stone and the tapered end of their poles. The man whose pole was the closest, counted one point for himself. The play was then repeated with a different player throwing the stone. The players often engaged in the game the greater part of the day or until one had lost

¹⁵Debo, op. cit., 9.

¹⁶Swanton, op. cit., 157.

all that he had to bet.¹⁷

Another gambling game that the Choctaws played was called the "Corn Game". It was played with five to eight kernels of corn blackened on one side. Any number of persons could play at the same time, but usually there were only two. Holding the kernels in one hand the players tossed them on the ground. Each player had three tosses. The one making the greatest number of points won. The points were determined by the way in which the kernels turned up on the ground. For each black side up the player counted one point. If all the white sides were up then the player counted five, seven or eight, depending on the number of grains used.¹⁸

During the hot months of the year a favorite sport of the men and boys consisted in trying to swim across a wide stream to a given point while blindfolded. The first to reach the point was declared the winner. A somewhat similar amusement participated in by men and boys consisted in rolling down hills while wrapped and tied in blankets or skins. The first to reach the predetermined line was the winner.¹⁹

Dancing held an important place in the social life of every Choctaw community. All of their dances were of a social and recreational nature, rather than religious as were those of most other Indian tribes. Every village of any size was

¹⁷ Bureau of American Ethnology, Twenty-fourth Annual Report, (1902-1903), 485.

¹⁸ Swanton, op. cit., 159.

¹⁹ Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 48, p. 20.

built around an open space, which was used for dances, councils and other community gatherings.²⁰ As has been stated previously, most of the social affairs were preceded or followed by a dance.

The drum was used to make the music for all of the dances. It was made from a section of a small hollowed log. Fresh deer skins, cleansed of hair, were stretched over the ends of the log. When the skins dried they became very tight. When struck by a stick the drums produced a primitive and dull sound.²¹ The sound thus produced and accompanied by the drummer's voice stirred the emotions of the Choctaws and caused them to dance to the rhythm of the monotonous tone.

The Choctaws had many different dances. The most important ones were the green corn-dance, war-dance, scalp-dance, ball play-dance and the eagle-dance. The eagle dance was the most difficult to perform, because the dancers squatted down with their bodies almost to the ground.²² This dance was in honor of the eagle and was danced by twelve or sixteen men. Their bodies were almost naked and painted with white clay. Each dancer held in his hand the tail of an eagle and his head was decorated with eagle's quill. Spears were stuck in the ground, around which the dance was performed by four men at a time. The dancers sat on the ground in rows of four. At the beat of the drum the four men in the front row danced around

²⁰Debo, op. cit., 7.

²¹Swanton, op. cit., 223.

²²Ibid., 222.

the spears until they became fatigued then they hopped around behind the others and sat down ready to take their turn when it came. When the first four left the dance ground the second four took their place. The dance continued in the same manner until each group of four had danced several times.

The green corn-dance was held in the summer, usually in August. It lasted for three days. Before the dance hunters were appointed to supply game to be eaten with the new ripe corn. While all of the people were together laws were made for the coming year. Time was also taken to check the relationship between every two families in order to properly regulate marriages.²³

Through their intercourse with the white race the Choctaws definitely adopted the white man's institutions. They continued this development after their expulsion from their ancient homes and their settlement in the western land to which they were driven. Before the Civil War, they established churches and schools and a stable constitutional government, and became fairly prosperous farmers and stock raisers. By 1900, the Choctaws as well as many other Indian tribes in Oklahoma had almost completely discontinued their old tribal customs and ways and had taken up those of the white man.

²³Ibid., 225.

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