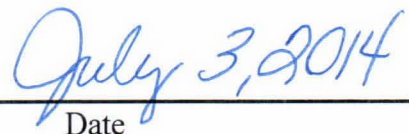
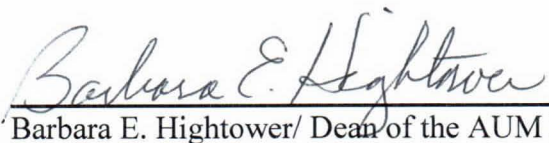
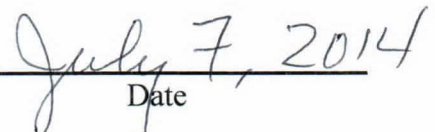


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THE CHOCTAW INDIANS OF THE SOUTHEASTERN STATES

By

Brandi Moran DeSandro

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University at Montgomery

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts

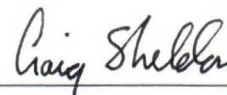
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Paleo Indians	1
Archaic Indians	3
Woodland Indians	6
Mississippian Indians	7
Emergence of the Choctaw	9
Chiefdom System of Governing	10
Religious Beliefs	12
Religious Practitioners	14
Rituals and Ceremonies	14
Death and Afterlife	19
Medicine	20
Arts	22
Recreation	24
Economy	26
Arrival of Europeans	27
Tecumseh and Lalawethika	29
The Removal	31
Dawes Severalty Act of 1887	36
Emergence in the 20 th Century	37
Conclusion-Prosperity	42
End Notes	45
Works Cited	53

The Choctaws of the Southeast

The United States of America was once inhabited totally by people called Paleo Indians. Through their evolution of individualization of tribes, the Choctaw Indians, east of the Mississippi River, emerged from the Mississippian Indians. While this is not a fairy tale, it is a long and enduring tale of people who developed a civilization through migration and adaption to lands and changing climate conditions. However, it was anything but a happy ending, due to the loss of lives and hardships bestowed upon them by new settlers. Although the Choctaw were great in number and had a well-organized community, the white man destroyed them with lies and the forced removal from their land. Their struggles included invaders claiming new land, war, plagues, mass deaths, poverty, and evacuation of the land they called home. These calamities stripped them of much of their culture and what they knew as a way of life. Along with being deprived of their traditions, the Choctaw Indians were given fewer rights than slaves. The Choctaw Nation is not as large as it once was, but it has survived by holding on to some traditional values, such as religion, love of the Earth Mother, ceremonies, rituals, family, the protection of their land, politics, and a resilient belief system. In order to understand what happened to the Choctaw people, it is important to know their history and heritage, and what they faced as a culture. It is important to know how these ancient people became people of importance and a community to be admired.

Paleo Indians

Scientists believe that a huge migration took place during the time known as the Ice Age, which was nearly 12,000 years ago. These indigenous people traveled from Asia to the North American Continent and were called Paleo Indians. "At this time, much of the water was frozen in glaciers and sea levels were lower than they are today. They crossed the Bering Land Bridge between Russia and Alaska which seems to have been teeming with life."¹ It was a slow and treacherous journey.

Paleo Indians were nomadic people, which meant they did not live in one place for more than three to four days unless a large animal had been killed and they needed time to clean the meat and hide. They traveled in highly mobile bands consisting of approximately 20 to 60 members of an extended family.² Following the animals for food, they hunted in small groups of 25 to 50 hunters. They used wooden long and short spears for hunting. The long spears, known as Clovis Spears, were used to hunt large animals such as the bear, bison, caribou, and the great woolly mammoth; the short spears were used for hunting smaller animals like the arctic fox and rabbit. There have not been any sufficient artifacts or other evidence that proves the natives knew about or celebrated any spiritual ceremonies. "However, two or three Paleo-Indian burials from Montana contained a cache of extraordinary Clovis points, and large bifacial knives all of which were covered by a dusting of red ochre."³ It is thought that the Paleo-Indians believed that these items could be carried to the afterlife. "The Clovis

points from these burials are so large and exquisite that they may not have been functional tools, but true offerings.”⁴

As the Paleo Indians slowly moved south and southeast, they were on a continuous journey to gather food. By the end of the Ice Age, the Paleo Era had come to an end, thus leading to a new era of the Archaic Indians in 8,500 B.C.

Archaic Indians

The Archaic Period was looked upon as a technological advancement in its time. “The Early Archaic period was defined on the basis of chipped stone projectile point technology and styles. This time period is associated with the final glacial retreat on the North American continent and an environment similar to that found in the Southeast today.”⁵ Warmer seasons were taking place, and the lands were not completely covered in freezing ice. The melting of ice formed lakes, creeks, and rivers provided water for drinking and cooking.

It is believed that because of this development, bands of Indians began establishing their camps near water sources for hunting and gathering of food. Hunting was a major source of the food supply, but eventually the larger animals were nowhere to be found. According to archaeologists, “Between 6,000 and 12,000 years ago, however, many large animal species became extinct. Archaeologists do not agree why these animals died out. Some argue that it was the result of over killing; others attribute it to climatic changes: rising temperatures, the drying up of many lakes, and the loss of many early forms of vegetation.”⁶ This loss of big game resulted in hunting for other types of animals, like the white tail deer.

Scientists have been amazed at the technological development in tool making during this period. The evidence found by scientists of several types of tools also led to the belief that camps were established near water sources. "The range of lithic tools included knives, perforators, drills, choppers, flake knives and scrapers, gouges, and hammerstones. In addition, wet sites, such as the Windover Site near present-day Titusville, Florida, which produced exceptionally well-preserved organic materials, have enlarged this inventory to include: bone points, atlatl hooks, barbed points, fish hooks, and pins; shell adzes; wooden stakes and canoes; and fragments of cloth and woven bags."⁷

Another exceptional example of how these people lived during the Archaic Period was found in Russell Cave in Northern Alabama. "Russell Cave offers one of the longest and most complete archaeological records in the eastern United States. The artifacts found here indicate intermittent human habitation for almost 9,000 years. Using carbon-14 dating techniques, researchers have dated to within 300 years the charcoal remains from fires uncovered at various depths."⁸ The cave was uninhabitable until the cave's roof and other sediments began to raise the cave floor. While there is limited evidence of the cave being used during the Paleo Period, its use truly began during the Archaic Period. The Russell Cave was used throughout the year, but it was primarily used during the autumn and the winter seasons. The cave mouth faced south and made it an ideal protection from the northern winds. It was continuously used as a hunting camp throughout the Woodland and Mississippian Periods. This was the case until villages became common establishments.

The atlatl was developed by the Archaic Indians with a hook on the end to project spears farther. "Atlatl [spear thrower] banner weights may have held more than technological significance. Some are finely carved, ground, and polished works of art and suggest that they may have been intended to provide hunting success by depicting powerful animals and beings of the spirit world."⁹ This era also offered many other "examples of these peoples' increasing technological sophistication, evident in the proliferation of such objects as awls, axes, darts, millstones, and woven baskets."¹⁰

Most of what we know about the Archaic Indians came from the findings of shell mounds beside the Tennessee River. Russell Cave provides proof that shellfish and oyster shells, which the Indians extracted from the Tennessee River, were part of their diet. These people added mussels (freshwater clams), fish, and plants for their food. "This period demonstrated the first occurrence of shellfish collecting within river valleys and along the seacoast. At these "base" camps are found storage pits, remains of house floors, and prepared burials, all indications of increased sedentism at certain sites."¹¹ Sedentarism, a way of living in permanent villages, was practiced by tribes. Agriculture was practiced by most sedentary tribes. However, "A distinction between sedentary agriculturists and nomadic hunters may be more useful than the distinctions between "civilized" and "uncivilized."¹² The establishment of these camps showed signs of large communities, which leads scientists to believe that trading took place amongst these people. "Sedentary peoples and hunters often lived near each other and shared mutual hostility and disregard, but, in fact, the categories of

sedentary, semi-sedentary, and hunter-gatherers were never clear-cut and many aspects of life were shared by them all."¹³

"Although rare, some Archaic sites, particularly the larger villages of the Late Archaic, had cemeteries for deceased community members. These cemeteries are a measure of the spiritual beliefs of the community. Ornaments found with some individual burials suggest the link between these Archaic peoples' natural surroundings and their supernatural beliefs."¹⁴ Like the Paleo Indians, the Archaic Indians left symbolic items in their burial sites most likely because they believed there was an afterlife. It is also likely that with so many community ceremonies, the Archaic Indians practiced a burial ceremony.

During the Late Archaic Period, 3000 BC to 1000 BC, the indigenous Indians began to develop ceramics. Plain and decorated ceramics, which were found along the South Atlantic Coast, were evidence of their existence. "This ceramic technology spread westward to the coastal plain of Alabama and Mississippi, to the Poverty Point culture area, southward into Florida, and eventually most of the southeastern United States. The appearance of this new technology has traditionally been viewed as the transitional period between the Archaic hunting and gathering societies and the emergence of settled Woodland period villages and communities, where existence depended on a combination of horticulture and hunting and gathering."¹⁵ It appeared to scientists that the end of the Archaic Period "was the beginning of a southeastern mound-building tradition that would be further elaborated on in the succeeding Woodland and Mississippian periods."¹⁶

Woodland Indians

The Woodland Period, which took place between 1000 BC – 1000 AD, was similar to that of the Archaic Period. This is because the Woodland Indians continued to develop and produce pottery. “During the early Gulf Formational period (circa 2000 to 1000 B.C.) of Alabama, middle Tennessee, and eastern Mississippi, fiber-tempered ceramic technology was acquired as a by-product of trade between the Stallings Island and Orange cultures of the South Atlantic coast and the Poverty Point culture of the lower Mississippi River Valley.”¹⁷

The main thing that set the two periods apart was the culture. “In recent years archeologists in the southeastern United States have addressed the issue of agricultural development by investigating Woodland village sites to learn more about the subsistence patterns of the period. This has sometimes led to establishing cultural chronologies that separate Archaic from Woodland cultures with a transitional stage of cultural development, or to postulating alternative subsistence strategies for the cultures of the Early Woodland period in the Southeast.”¹⁸ These villages were not temporary sites for living—they became permanent living communities. The Woodland Indians lived in the same place most of the time. Crop cultivation or planting, growing, and harvesting food crops, made it possible for the Indians to live in one place. Woodland men hunted to obtain meat for the families of the village, and young men were taught to hunt mammals and birds and to catch fish. Although the Woodland people continued to use the Archaic technology of the spear, the Woodland’s contribution was the bow and arrow.¹⁹

The women were responsible for teaching the girls about which foods to gather. They taught their daughters which wild greens, seeds and berries were good to eat and how to grow plants such as corn, greens, beans, squash and sunflowers.

Mississippian Indians

The Mississippian Indians, like the Woodland Indians, were farmers. They grew and developed new types of corn, squash, beans, and pumpkins. They hunted animals with bows and arrows or caught them in traps. They fished with hooks made of bone, or with baskets. The Mississippian Indians were also known as the Mound Builders, builders of mounds of dirt. The leaders lived on top of some of the created mounds. The idea of the mounds found throughout the United States was created by Mississippian Indians. The purpose of these mounds, discovered in the Southeast, also explains how the Choctaw Nation began their existence as a well-organized tribe. According to tribal legend, the Choctaws originated from *Nunih Waiya*, meaning "Productive Mound," or referred to as the "Mother Mound", at a location near what is present-day Noxapatar, Mississippi.²⁰ The story is that the Choctaws were on a journey for months to find a place to settle for the winter; however, they continuously moved in the direction in which the prophet's staff leaned. "The eastward movement consumed either 29 or 43 years, depending on the source of the legend."²¹

They rested only after scouts reported a place in Mississippi, not far from their location, which was flourishing with nuts, fruits, and game, as well as the

flowing waters of three creeks that met and were full of fish. This looked promising as a place for them to rest for the winter.

Many of the people had to carry bones of family members and friends who had died. It was believed that the spirits of the dead hovered over the bones, making sure that they were not left behind or mistreated. Being superstitious people, they believed that if the bones were not watched over, then hunger, sickness, or death would follow as the results of a curse. The bones had been carried for so long that many of the young forgot whose bones they were carrying. This was also due to a religious belief that once a person dies, his/her name was not to be mentioned. This created a burden on the people who were responsible for caring for the bones. They did not want to carry them anymore, but they also knew they could not leave them behind. It was up to the chief to decide what to do. He called a meeting of his people and spoke to them respectfully. He explained to them his idea:

I propose that we shall by general consent and mutual good feelings select an eligible location within the limits of the encampment and there, in the most respectful manner, bring together and pile up in beautiful and tasteful style a vast amount of bones we have packed so far and with which many of the people have been so grievously oppressed. Let each set of bones remain in its sack, and after the sacks are closely and neatly piled up, let them be thickly covered with cypress bark. After this, to appease and satisfy the spirits of our deceased relatives, our blood kin, let all persons, old and young, great and small, manifest their respect for the dead, by their energy and industry in carrying dirt to cover them up, and let the work of carrying and piling

earth upon them be continued until every heart is satisfied. These bones, as we all know, are of the same iksa, the same kindred. They were all the same flesh and blood; and for us to pile their bones all in the same heap and securely cover them up will be more pleasing to the spirits, than it will be to let them remain amongst the people, to be scattered over the plains, when the sacks wear out in the hands of another generation who will know but little and care less about them.²²

Emergence of the Choctaw

The story of the Mississippians indicates that the Choctaws were descended from the earlier Temple Mound Builders of the Southeast and that the *Nunih Waiya Mound* became the center of the Choctaw homeland. The reason why several mounds were found throughout the Southeastern states is that the Choctaws adopted a type of burial believed to be an extension of what the Mississippians created. When a member of the tribe died away from the camp during war with the Creek or Cherokee or killed by an animal, then the body was to be left as it died. His/her weapons (i.e. a bow) or tools were placed next to the body and his/her face covered. "Life for a life was the law; and every life had to be accounted for in a satisfactory manner. It would not answer for a man to return home and report that his hunting companion or his wife had been lost or drowned, devoured by wild beasts or died a natural death. He must show the body."²³ This would account for the several mounds found throughout the Southeast. However, the larger mounds would more than likely be representative of an affectionate wife who had lost her husband. The reason is that when a loved one died close to camp, then the immediate family members would live

near the body, all the while covering it every day until there was not any food around to feed them. Sometimes, men, women, and children would arrive back at camp weeks or months later looking very thin and weak.

At the time of early European contacts with them, the Choctaws were one of the largest tribes of the Southeast, occupying territory in what is now southern and central Mississippi and with some groups in Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana as well.²⁴ They “lived off both agriculture and hunter gathering. Their principal source of food was corn, beans, and pumpkins, nuts, fruit, fish, bear, and deer.”²⁵

It is believed that the Choctaws were made up of several different surrounding groups of Indians that came together to form one large community and accepted a common way of living and type of ruling, which allowed them to become one of the largest tribes.

Chiefdom System of Governing

The Choctaws inherited the of the chiefdom governing system from the Mississippian Indians. The Mississippian Indians had a culture that was ruled by a chief. “The hereditary chief, known as the Great Sun, had nearly absolute power over his subjects.”²⁶ Communities were represented by a distinguished warrior to uphold a leadership role to speak to the community council for the people. The types of issues that would be brought to the council would be about “tilling the fields owned by the community, making repairs on public buildings, or constructing a barricade around the village.”²⁷ They practiced an early form of

democracy. If an agreement could not be made, then a vote was taken and the majority won the agreement. The minority would then accept the ruling.

In the Mississippian chiefdom system, “the people were organized by clans named after animals. Belonging to a clan was a matter of kinship, of blood ties. The members of a clan were all related to one another matrilineally—that is, they were all descendants from a common ancestress through the female line.”²⁸ However, on rare occasions, a person could be adopted into a clan if he/she had no ties to any of the families in a community.

Throughout the south, “the Choctaw and other neighboring people were matrilineal, which meant that descent was traced through the mother and not the father. Thus a father did not stand as the most important male in his own children’s lives; instead their eldest uncle—their mother’s brother—did. For the Choctaws, the French insistence of being their father—a person who was kind and generous but without authority—instead of their uncle was confusing, but it relieved them of any obligation of obedience to the French governor. In Louisiana the fiction was...the French governor was a father to his Indian Children.”²⁹ The French were accustomed to the father ruling the house. They did not understand the ways of the mother’s lineage being the deciding factor of authority. By placing a governor over the Choctaw people, it would do away with the confusion and place one person as father of all as a mediator. This would take precedence over the uncle or any lineage of the mother. “And so a mongrel kinship relationship arose on the middle ground.”³⁰

“The powers women possessed in matrilineal, agricultural societies were real enough, but this did not mean that women controlled these societies. Instead, these powers protected the female sphere against the demands of men. Women, not men, owned the lodge, retained custody of children when a couple separated, and had ownership of the fruits of their labor.”³¹ The women controlled the crops. In this respect, it was the women who decided what was to be done with the crops grown and dealt with the traders. The men hunted and were protectors of the homes.

Religious Beliefs

“Choctaw traditional religion was largely unrecorded before early nineteenth-century Christian missionaries influenced traditional practices.”³² Choctaw historian Clara Sue Kidwell stated that “The sun was the Supreme Being, and fire, its mate, gave the sun information about human activities. It had the power of life and death, which explains its importance in the funeral customs of the Choctaws. A dead body was exposed to the rays of the sun on a raised platform and allowed to decay, thus giving itself back to the supreme power.”³³ This is very different from earlier thoughts that the body was lifted to keep animals away and the smell of decay from blowing in the village direction while a burial was being prepared.

The Choctaws “believed in numerous animal and anthropomorphic spirits who influenced human affairs continued after the coming of Christianity.”³⁴ They maintained a deep faith in the supernatural forces linking humans and other living creatures even after they were later forced to conform to Christianity. The

importance of maintaining harmony with nature, fellowmen, and the supernatural world is central to Choctaw beliefs.³⁵ Like most Native American tribes, the Choctaw still believe that they are part of nature and should respect it by taking care of it. If nature is not treated with respect and taken care of, then it will die and not produce food, water, or materials for living.

The Choctaw had other religious beliefs. For example, "it was unlucky to see an owl, and wise to avoid cemeteries with a wide detour. None of the clothing or effects of a dead person were kept, for fear of contagion. Suicides were usually not honored with a proper funeral, as they were considered to have squandered their life and cheated their families and community." This was similar to the practices of Catholics, because the spirit of the person who committed suicide would not go to Heaven, but go to Hell. This was considered a disgrace for the family. For the Choctaws, "it was believed that the time and place of everyone's death was foreordained. This gave warriors courage in battle but caused a lot of beliefs concerning graveyards, journeys, and funerals."³⁶ By committing suicide, the foreordained, the predetermined death by higher being or spirit, was interrupted and not natural or considered honorable.

"The Choctaw and many other tribal cultures throughout the Americas practiced symbolic cannibalism. Whenever a new fire is kindled, the ashes of the ancestors are mingled with it and inhaled in its smoke by the descendants."³⁷ It is important to understand that this type of cannibalism is only symbolic and not holistic in the sense that the flesh was not eaten in any form. This type of

cannibalism was used to seek wisdom or knowledge from their ancestors who died.

Religious Practitioners

During the Mississippian Period, the prophet or medicine man had a higher standing than the chief. But, with all good things, there comes a time when it is not good to be so high in the hierarchy of society. If a medicine man could not save someone from a sickness, then he was beaten to death. The bone pickers were also well-respected religious figures. They practiced magic and performed ritual ceremonies for the dead.

“In aboriginal times, the influence of Choctaw prophets and doctors was considerable, and the belief in witchcraft was strong. By the nineteenth century, the influence of Christian Choctaw pastors was important in most Choctaw communities in Oklahoma and Mississippi.”³⁸ With the removal of the Choctaws from the South to the West, the knowledge of the medicine was mostly lost with those who died. The knowledge was not a written one. The importance of healing remedies was overshadowed by the pressure to learn European Christian ways.

Rituals and Ceremonies

The Choctaws had rituals and ceremonies that started from the birth of a child to the death of a person. The first ritual that was performed on a newborn was to create a physical attraction feature. The infant would be placed on a plank of wood, and his/her forehead would be strapped down. This painless head flattening process would continue for a year. “The Choctaw believed that a square, flat forehead was a beautiful feature, so almost from birth they slowly

began to mold an infant's head so it would be permanently flat."³⁹ Many Europeans would comment on the Flatheads in their journals. This was an unusual feature. "The head-flattening ritual of the Choctaw Indians was an important part of their tribal identity. Europeans and Anglo-American observers often referred to the Choctaw as "flatheads" because of the unique shape of their foreheads."⁴⁰ This is a practice that does not exist in today's Choctaw society. The term 'papoose' is still commonly used and is a feature for carrying infants used not only by Choctaws but also by modern society. The papoose is referred to as a child carrier and is available in a variety of styles and shapes.

One of the most popular ceremonies and rituals performed by the Choctaws, which is still celebrated today by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, is the Green Corn Ceremony. "Choctaw ceremonies were similar to [those of] other Southeastern tribes, with the Green Corn ceremonies being most important. Observers noted that the Choctaw held fewer religious ceremonies and more social dances than their neighbors."⁴¹

The Green Corn Ceremony has now been turned into a festival, known as the Green Corn Festival. "This festival coincided with the harvesting of the summer corn and was conducted to give thanks for the harvest and as a ritual means of self-cleansing. During the festival, Choctaw men and women thoroughly clean their entire communities, including all public spaces and individual homes."⁴² This ceremony is the cleansing of wrongs that have been done, which is similar to the Christian belief of forgiveness of sins. "Crimes and

social conflicts were discussed with the purpose of allowing them to be forgiven.”⁴³ With everyone dressed in their best regalia, they all watched as the priest put out the fire. “During the Choctaw fire ritual all the fires in the community were put out and everyone was silent. Then a new fire was lit to start off the new year and the Choctaw ritual would continue with feasting and celebration.”⁴⁴

Ceremonies for the dead practiced by the Choctaw people involved mourning, celebrating, and respecting those who have gone on to the spirit world. Although there have been many different rituals of burying the dead, one ritual was practiced by the ancient natives and passed down to the earliest Choctaws; the other is still performed by the Choctaw Nations of today.

The oldest burial ritual, which has not been practiced for some 200 years, was known for using bone pickers. After the death of a person in the tribe, the tribe set up camp for enough time for the body to decay and the bone pickers to clean the bone. “The deceased were scaffolded in their best clothing and painted in an elaborated and personal fashion, so that the sun would recognize them. Often a favorite weapon or (in the case of a woman) her beauty stone or household heirloom was included on the bier.”⁴⁵ “The body of the Choctaw was placed on a platform raised above the ground, either on posts or fastened high in trees but out in the clear enough that the breezes could pass on all sides of the body to help with the ‘ripening’. Generally, one moon month (28 days) was allowed for the body to become decomposed enough so that the bone picker could perform his part of the ceremony.”⁴⁶ “Choctaw men and women with long

fingernails would scrape the remaining flesh off of the bones of a corpse after the corpse had sat several weeks on a scaffold.”⁴⁷

The bone pickers were known to be a part of a revered figure of the Turkey Buzzard Society. “Males and females in the Turkey Buzzard Cult were venerated and trusted, never feared, since their powers were benign and beneficial, unlike most witchcraft. Often they were also healers. Only they could perform the Turkey Buzzard Dance at festivals. Significantly, their totem animal fed only on carrion and did not kill for its meat as did the owl, eagle, hawk, panther, and other carnivores.”⁴⁸ Like a buzzard, buzzards only ate ‘carrion’, dead flesh, and never killed for its food.

The mourning process “was known as a ‘cry-time’ for family members, during which, they went into retreat, fasted, covered their heads, and mourned.”⁴⁹ “A period of mourning followed for family members. Signs of mourning included cutting the hair (which represented accumulated memories), assuming a negligent appearance, not remarrying, staying segregated by sex, and being seen only by other clansmen.”⁵⁰ “While the body was ‘ripening,’ the family of the dead person prepared for the final ceremony and notified relatives and friends when the ceremony would be held.”⁵¹ It was not customary for family members to visit the body, but rather to mourn from a distance, perhaps in the woods.

When the bone picking was complete, the bones would then be sewn into leather sacks for the family members to carry until it was time to have a burial ceremony. “The purpose of this Choctaw ritual was to clean the bones of the dead so that the relatives of the deceased could take the bones and eventually

bury them during the Festival of Mourning for the Dead that occurred twice a year. During this Choctaw ritual the bones of all those who had died since the last festival were taken and buried together in a mound.⁵² It was the responsibility of the members and relatives to keep and carry them until the time of the burial ceremony.

Another burial ceremony, which is still in existence, is known as the Funeral Cry Ceremony. The only problem is that only members of the Choctaw Nation get to witness this ceremony. It is kept "extremely private and outsiders are not allowed to attend."⁵³ Although it is called a Funeral Cry, it is meant to be a celebration of the good things remembered about the person. Unlike today's funerals, which take place within days of a death, this ceremony is not performed until weeks after the death. Everyone who attends takes turns speaking of the person and telling stories. "The Funeral Cry serves as a way to honor the deceased and celebrate the good that person did in her life."⁵⁴

On the day of a death, the oldest male member of the bereaved family would cut 28 small sticks, representing the days of the lunar month, and stick them into the eaves of the family house or cabin. Each morning thereafter, one stick would be removed and burned in a fire, until ten sticks remained. At that time, word was sent out to a relatives and friends as to the time and place for the Funeral Cry.⁵⁵

Those attending would bring food to the designated spot on the day that the final stick was removed from the eaves of the house, and the Funeral Cry would start. The family and guests would sit in circles, with the immediate family in the inmost circle,

relatives in the next two or three circles and friends in the outer circles. All would eat, and after they had their fill the funeral crying (or talking) would begin. This would begin with the oldest male family member present. He would stand and tell everything good about the deceased that he could recall. Then in turn, each family member around the circle would do the same. After the inner circle had each had opportunity to speak, those in the second circle would speak and so forth until everyone had his or her say or the group became hungry again. Everyone present was allowed time to speak his thoughts about the deceased, with the only time-out being while the group stopped to eat some more of the food should that become necessary. The beauty of the Funeral Cry is in the facts that the family has been allowed the time to "get over" the harshest part of its grief and that only good may be spoken of the deceased person at his Funeral Cry.⁵⁶

The Funeral Cry Ceremony was once open to all for viewing; however, due to the arrival of European Explorers, the Ceremony had to be closed. White immigrants would disrupt the ceremony and make loud noises. The Choctaw began to hold the ceremony in secrecy and even conducted them underground.⁵⁷

Death and Afterlife

The Choctaw Indians were very spiritual people and as mentioned above were a religious culture. "Death, like disease, could be the result of either natural or supernatural forces. Choctaw believed in an afterworld to which spirits of the dead go and in which individuals experience reward or punishment depending on their life on earth. Funeral ceremonies are the most important life cycle ritual."⁵⁸

Before Christianity, the Choctaws had a different belief as to where a spirit goes after death. This meant that they believed there was a “beautiful gathering place in the west with good hunting, perpetual games, and plenty of food (legend’s “happy hunting ground”).” They did, however, know that there was a Creator, but believed “the Milky Way was the path.” Reincarnation would have otherwise taken place as it does for those of good nature. “Newborns often received the name of a recently passed uncle or aunt in the hope or recognition that they would carry the elder one’s spirit.”⁵⁹

There was a process that the soul went through before it moved on the happy hunting ground. They “believed that it took four days for a soul to become embodied in a person, and four days for that soul to be prepared for its long and final journey.”⁶⁰ Spirits left roaming on earth were considered to be “pitiful spirits.” The legend tells that if a person dies without just reason or being “unavenged,” then his/her soul may be left to roam the earth. Many Choctaws worried about the afterlife and feared witches. Witches had the knowledge and ability to steal souls of dying people, which prevented them from moving on to a happy place. This would give the witches the power to defy death and the strength of the souls collected.

Just like Christians, the Choctaws believed in a place that was horrible and evil. If a person was bad on earth, then his soul would wander the earth for hundreds of years experiencing the wrongs he had bestowed on others. Once the time was complete, the spirit would disperse, never to be reborn. “To the Native mind, that was the worst fate imaginable—not only to die unmourned, but

also for one's spirit to be destroyed.”⁶¹ There would be no returning to live life again.

Medicine

Sickness or injuries did not suddenly happen with the arrival of Europeans. Since the beginning of time, people have had to develop concoctions and devices to help people get back to a healthy state. Of course, many learned the hard way as to whether something worked or not. In the case of Native Americans, legend and knowledge would be passed down from generation to generation. Since the Pre-historic Paleo-Indians, nature has supplied material for the use of medicines and bandages. According to the Southeastern Archeological Center, their research explains that “The Archaic Indians also used plants as medicine. Spider webs were placed on skin to stop bleeding.”⁶²

“The Choctaw Medicine Man, or Alikchi, knew much about the use of herbs, roots and other mixtures to heal the sick.”⁶³ Only certain medicines could be made with particular plants and roots, because of regions of location. So, tribes had to adapt to what was available; thus, there were different solutions for the same ailment. The Choctaw and many other tribes shared information of medicines. To process the roots, “Roots were dug in the fall of the year when they were purer and most of the poison had gone out of them. They were steamed to the boiling point but were not allowed to boil hard.”⁶⁴ Medicines made from these plants and roots appeared to heal the common cold, sore throats, toothaches, cramps, etc. The following are examples of how Choctaws used parts of plants and what they were used for:

*The Choctaws used scurvy grass to clean the teeth.

*Sampson snake root (Choctaw, nipi lapushkichi) is a poison to any other poison and was therefore used in cases of snakebite.

*The Mayapple (Choctaw, fala imisito) or "crow pumpkin" is a fine medicine. The fruit is given to children as a purgative. In cases of biliousness they powdered the root, put half an ounce of this into a pint of water, boiled it down to about an ounce, and mixed it with whiskey. One swallow, or as much as a person could stand, was a dose. It received its name from the fact that the crow, which is a wise bird, feeds upon the Mayapple.

*The wild cherry is looked upon as one of the best medicines for young girls. In winter, if cherry wine has not been put up, a tea may be made of the leaves, which is given internally to stop pain and cause perspiration. If enough is taken it was believed to purify the blood. If the leaves are gone, the outside bark may be peeled away and the inside bark used in the same way and for the same purposes.

*The prickly ash (Choctaw, nuti alikchi) is good in cases of toothache. A piece of bark may be cut off to hold in the cavity of the tooth, or it may be powdered and made into a poultice.

*Modoc weed "yellow root" (Choctaw, akshish lakna) was used for a weak stomach, in cases of fainting or when the nerves give way. The roots were boiled in water and taken along with whisky.

*Golden rod (Choctaw, okhinsh balalli) and the puccoon root were sold to the whites for medicinal purposes but not employed by the Choctaw.

*The pottage pea (Choctaw, balongtaichi tapachi) is an onion-like root with a sweetish taste used in cases of diarrhea.

*The butterfly root (Choctaw, hatapushik okhinsh, "butterfly medicine") was used for human beings in cases of colds. The tops could be employed as well as the roots. However, it seems to have been more often employed as a medicine for horses, being given when they had the blind staggers or seemed physically broken down. It was also given them in the fall to protect them from such sickness the following spring.⁶⁵

"The Choctaw believe serious persistent illnesses to be a product of spiritual evil often associated with witchcraft. Curing consisted of herbal medicines, ritual purifications, and the enlistment of spirit helpers to drive out evil forces. Western clinical medicine is generally used today, but native Choctaw doctors are still consulted."⁶⁶

Arts

The Choctaw Indians used a variety of natural materials to create art. But, what modern society considered a work of art was actually a way of life for the Choctaw and dates all the way back to approximately 4,000 years ago. With the Choctaw Indians being direct descendants of the Woodland and Mississippian Indians who migrated to the southeast, they passed down their culture of basket weaving and wood carving to new generations. These generations learned how to use other materials in the natural world for dyeing and painting.

"The basket weaving was so important that there would be different types of baskets used for carrying different items. This varied from dinner baskets to knife baskets, which were made for each specific use."⁶⁷ The material used was found in their environment. With Mississippi being the main home of the Choctaw

Indians, other Choctaw tribes spread through the coastal states of Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida. All of these areas were brimming with naturally grown cane near rivers. The cane would be chopped, cut into strips, and dried. To add color to the baskets, other selected plants would be soaked in water to extract dyes. The Choctaws would then soak the cane to change its color to give designs to the various baskets. "When weaving these baskets, there were two major types of weaves that were used."⁶⁸ One was with a single weave, meaning a single cane element would go over and under other elements. The second was a double weave, which two paired elements would go over and under two elements. "Each type would be of differing sturdiness, making it easier to carry what was needed."⁶⁹

Eveline Steele of Broken Bow of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma continues to make traditional baskets, a skill taught to her by her mother and grandmother. Her baskets are featured in the Smithsonian Museum and more are to be placed on display. She has also had baskets on display in Natchez, Mississippi in the Grand Village, as well as in Louisiana. "The process of making a traditional Choctaw basket consists of several steps. According to Eveline, first you must locate good cane, and carefully select, harvest, and prepare it. Remove branches and smooth poles; wash each pole with water and a sponge, leaving one side abrasive and the other soft. Making these strands of processed cane fiber is the most important aspect of basket weaving. After about two weeks of processing the fibers, the dyeing process follows. Eveline uses mostly black, dark

brown, reddish, and a yellowish tint, the shades you get from natural dyes. The use of natural dyes increases the value of a basket.”⁷⁰

Although the Choctaw made original baskets when they were removed from the Southeast, they adopted the craft of jewelry making and beading as part of their art. With these materials being available in their new region, they made this craft very popular. “While commercial dyes are used almost exclusively today,” said Eveline, “It is important to know the natural dyes and dye method,” which is another process of its own, knowing when and what to harvest, including the availability of roots, bark, nuts, berries, and flowers.”⁷¹

Another form of art that is indicative of the Choctaws is wood carvings. Wood carvings were important in every aspect of a Choctaw’s life. Staffs, pipe, bows, and knives were carved with particular animals, depending on the purpose of the item. “For instance, pipes made out of wood were made of animals, which would represent a sacred concept.”⁷² Items such as beads, antlers, rabbit’s feet, claws, feathers, and many other materials would be used to decorate their artwork. “The feathers in some pipes were placed to represent a symbol of power of prayer that would rise to the heavens. This was true with all of the art, representing a spiritual concept that was linked to the way of life that the Choctaw led.”⁷³

Recreation

With the Choctaw Indians, like many of other tribes, stickball was a very popular recreation game. Stickball, very appropriately referred to as “little brother of war,” was known as the fore runner of today’s well-known lacrosse games.⁷⁴

The game could be played very violently or as a mild game of fun with men and women. In the Southeast, stickball was played more savagely with war-like tactics being acceptable. It was understood that players could be severely injured with broken bones or be killed during the game. "Players might be bashed on the head with the sticks or trampled underfoot if they stumbled and fell. Permanent maiming or even death was not an uncommon result of playing this version of lacrosse."⁷⁵ It was deemed fair to trip, bump, stop, and pile on top of each other, which caused these injuries.⁷⁶

Major games were played between villages. Large areas of land were cleared in preparation, and there was a huge spectacle with thousands of people gathering to watch. "The purpose of the game was to toss a leather ball between posts with rackets, or stick with curved or embedded ends. Players weren't allowed to touch the ball with their hands or to use the sticks to fight."⁷⁷ Posts were erected at the end of each field, representing each team. Players were to hurl the ball with their sticks and hit their goal post. The first team to reach 100 points won.

Prior to the actual event, many tribes would perform a pregame activity called "The Ball Dance." Both dances and ceremonies were closely associated with the very popular stickball.⁷⁸ A painting depicting "The Ball Dance" by 19th Century artist George Catlin can be found in *America's Fascinating Indians*. The explanation is as follows:

Two columns of women—squatting medicine men between them—are shuffled and chanting while stick-wielding players dance around the goal posts. The women asked for aid of the

Great Spirit “in deciding the game to their advantage.” This dance was repeated a dozen times during the night before the contest and was believed to whip the players into a combative frenzy.

This painting also depicts a large pile of goods and hunting supplies that has been put up for betting. Other items such as furs, skins, trinkets, jewelry, and baskets were brought for wages. The night before, “members of each team—75 to 100 men---painted their bodies, drank sacred medicine, danced, and sang.”⁷⁹ Many tribal nations use lacrosse as an expression of unity, pride, and Native American identity.⁸⁰

Economy

Before the arrival of European settlers to the New World, the Choctaw Indians were rich in agricultural farming. “They harvested rich food sources according to the season, fully exploiting their environment without destroying what sustained them.”⁸¹ Once the Europeans arrived, the exchange of foods changed the eating habits of both the Choctaw, as well as the Europeans. “Eating habits were revolutionized, as the potato, corn, and chocolate were introduced to the Old World, and sugar, cattle, chickens, pigs, and sheep were introduced to the New World.”⁸²

The trade market was thriving within the Choctaw villages and surrounding natives. With the Old World and the New World swapping supplies, integration of products within societies gave each world new purposes of trade. “Patterns of world trade were also overturned, as New World crops--like tobacco and cotton--and vastly expanded production of sugar--ignited growing consumer markets.”⁸³

The new settlers did not appreciate the land and its resources as the Choctaws did. While the Indians only burned off grassy areas and cleared what they needed, the “Europeans had a much more devastating impact on the environment, clearing huge tracts of forested lands and inadvertently introducing a vast variety of Old World weeds.”⁸⁴

Arrival of Europeans

The “New World” was not new for those who inhabited the continent and had already called it home. In the early 1500s, the life that was full of goodness and being one with the earth would soon change with the arrival of people with white skin. Life was about to change forever.

The first European explorers to the Southeast arrived in 1513. Led by Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon, they had arrived to the new land with aspirations of finding gold. The Spaniards would call this land “Florida.” Unlike the natives, they did not appreciate what the land had to offer, but only sought its riches. Upon not finding what they were looking for, the “Spaniards pillaged, burned, killed, and enslaved as they marched inland from the Florida coast, but far worse than their direct actions were the ailments they brought with them from Europe: smallpox, measles, typhus, tuberculosis, chicken pox, influenza, and cholera.”⁸⁵ Because this was the first time the natives were exposed to these diseases, their bodies immune systems could not fight them off. The explorers may not have been sick themselves, but because they carried these diseases, they inadvertently decimated thousands of Indians. These diseases spread so quickly that medicine men were not able to create solutions to cure their people.

With many of these medicine men and prophets being among the dead, the knowledge of how to make concoctions was lost.

After the early conquistador, Hernando De Soto, the Spaniards “established missions to convert the Indians to Christianity, schools to educate their children, and an agricultural system that required Indian labor. They relied on trade to gain the region.”⁸⁶ However, the Southeastern Indians were not inclined to be workers for the white man and for the first time found themselves indebted to the white man through trade. De Soto was primarily “interested in locating and seizing loot.”⁸⁷

It was a race for riches from the New World that sent not only Spain, but Britain and France on a destructive journey. While Spain occupied the Florida region, the British were rapidly expanding colonization along the Atlantic coast. They established their base camp in Charleston, North Carolina. Their goal was to lay claim to the Southeastern area.

The French settlers claimed “Louisiana—as the French named the vast Mississippi Valley that had been explored by Joliet, Marquette, and La Salle.”⁸⁸ Some of the French who were sent to colonize this land did not do so voluntarily. They learned to take up trade for furs with the Indians, as well as with other settlers.

With many tribes vanishing by disease and death from protecting their lands, trade and slavery became the inevitable downfall of the once vibrant indigenous people. With the natives becoming accustomed to trade and material items and weapons that the Europeans had to offer, the natives began attacking

other tribes and settlements, killing, stealing, and taking captives. Captives then were used for collateral for trade. Slavery began to be more common for explorers, because slaves could be used to carry their supplies. The Europeans soon realized that slaves were very cunning, and once they escaped, they could live on the land or hide out in familiar tribes. So, this brought about the purpose of taking slaves captured in the Southeast to the Northern colonies for trade. They would not know the land or the other Indians in the area. Slavery forced many to leave their homes. "By 1710, the whole northern half of the Florida peninsula was virtually deserted, except for a few communities of refugees."⁸⁹

With women in charge of trade of crops and fur, sexual exchanges slowly began to take place. The women used this type of trade to obtain alcohol, which they would take and sell in camps. "Women became sexual objects."⁹⁰ This began the prostitution trade of Native American women. When they had enough rum for trading, women would remove this trade from the table any time they wanted. This would pose a problem, because it made them dependent on the alcohol. "Captain Ouma, a chief of the Sixtowns Choctaw, compared the craving for liquor to a sexual desire. Rum, he said, was like a woman: "When a man wanted her—and saw her—He must have her." But the urge was not biological. Liquor was not always and everywhere a problem."⁹¹

In 1776, John Stuart estimated that among the Choctaws, "for one skin taken in exchange for British Manufacture, there are five gotten in exchange for liquor; the Effect of which is that the Indians are poor, wretched, naked, and

disconnected.” Here was one way in which more animals died, trade increased, and Indians grew poorer.”⁹²

Tecumseh and Lalawethika

One well-known rebellion against trade with the white Europeans took place in the early 1800s, when two Shawnee brothers “arose to revitalize and reunite the demoralized tribes with what began as essentially a religious movement.”⁹³ These two brothers were known as Tecumseh and Lalawethika. Tecumseh was a very handsome and well-built man with a good reputation. Lalawethika was a lazy alcoholic who told exaggerated stories and depended on Tecumseh’s living conditions and support of his family. One day, “Lalawethika fell into a trance and experienced a divine revelation that changed the course of his life.”⁹⁴ He told his people that they did not need the white man to survive and that they should give away all of their clothing and materials that had been acquired from the Europeans. He said that they needed to go back to their old ways and back to the culture of their people. Lalawethika changed his name to Tenskwatawa and vowed never to drink again. He carried the Creator’s message to villages and explained that the Creator wanted them to give up their promiscuous and alcoholic ways, for this was the way of the white man and not their way.

Tecumseh became a powerful voice for his brother and the belief that all Indians should join together with the British to stop the Americans from taking their lands. In many of Tecumseh’s travels in the summer of 1811, he journeyed

to the South to speak with the Choctaws. The Choctaw chief, Chief Pushmataha, received them warmly and listened to what Tecumseh proposed:

He spoke much of the bad conduct of the white people, how they were seizing the Indians' lands and reducing them to poverty, and he urged the Choctaws to join him in a general war against the oppressors. He urged, too, upon the Choctaws the duty of living at peace with the other Indian tribes; and that all the tribes ought to quit their inter-tribal wars and unite in a general confederacy; that by this means they could keep their lands and preserve their nationalities. Tecumseh also spoke of the impending war with Great Britain, and that the Choctaws must unite with the other tribes and all declare themselves allies of Great Britain. If we are to credit one of our Choctaw informants, Tecumseh also, in this talk, as well as in subsequent talks, spoke very earnestly against the Indian custom of killing women and children in war. This custom they should renounce, and henceforth, in all wars, the lives of women and children should be spared.⁹⁵

Chief Pushmataha liked the idea of bringing tribes together and the humanitarian aspect of Tecumseh's proposal, but he refused to join them against the Americans. Pushmataha explained that the Choctaw were peaceful people and did not shed blood of the white man. The Choctaws had been friendly with the Americans and felt that joining the British would definitely hinder their relationship. Tecumseh soon left, traveling from village to village with the same message. Unfortunately for him, Pushmataha's message was received and

carried on amongst all Choctaw people, which meant the Choctaw did not join Tecumseh in his fight against the Americans.

The Removal

For many years following the American Revolution, the Five Civilized Tribes, which included the Choctaw Nation, struggled to maintain a political relationship with the United States. "In the south, the Muskogees and Choctaws divided, each nation, indeed often each town, containing various factions—British, Spanish, American. Their various divisions created what amounted to a payoff system within each nation. They maintained ties with all powers; they went over completely to none. But factionalism could harm as well as hurt the interests of the nation as a whole, and fraudulent land cessions and treaties plagued the southern tribes."⁹⁶ No matter which faction governed a town, the Choctaw remained loyal. They would ultimately find themselves in continuous negotiations with the government to keep their own lands.

While there have been many treaties created between several nations of Native Americans and the United States, only four are quite significant when referring to the Choctaw Indians. The first significant treaty was The Treaty with the Choctaw of 1786. This treaty was drawn up upon the end of the French and Indian War. This treaty stated that the Choctaw were to release all prisoners and possessions acquired during the war. According to Washington's policy, Indians were supposed to be owners of the land upon which they lived. Article II of the treaty states, "The Commissioners Plenipotentiary of all the Choctaw nation, do hereby acknowledge the tribes and towns of the said nation, and the lands within

the boundary allotted to the said Indians to live and hunt on, as mentioned in the third article, to be under the protection of the United States of America, and of no other sovereign whosoever."⁹⁷ Boundaries and provisions were made between the two Nations. This treaty gave permission for the Choctaw to practice their own government under protection and cooperation with the United States.

On the 15th of June 1789, Henry Knox, Secretary of War, in charge of Indian Affairs, reported on the Northwestern Indians. Knox stated, "The Indians being the prior occupants possess the right of the soil. It cannot be taken from them unless by their free consent, or by the right of conquest in case of a just war. To dispossess them on any other principle, would be a gross violation of the fundamental laws of nature, and of that distributive justice which is the glory of a nation."⁹⁸ This, he believed, should be the principle in dealing with all Indian Nations, which included the Choctaw in the Southeast. Contrary to Knox's support, the government manipulated the situation and knew that the Native Americans would soon seek help from the government and surrender land for food and money.

Due to poor living conditions, the Choctaw began to suffer from owing money to the white men, which they grew to believe was the intent of the United States. Therefore, a second treaty was inevitable. Debt within the nation forced them to seek help from the United States. A Treaty of Limits was made, and the Choctaw gave all but 5,120 acres to the United States in exchange for \$50,500. The treaty actually states that the agreement was between the United States and

the Chaktaw Nation of Indians and was signed on November 16, 1805, by President Thomas Jefferson.

“Anywhere one went on the continent in the 18th Century: Indians were playing vital and critical roles in constructing new political systems in the wake of the changes brought by contract.”⁹⁹ This could not be any truer for Choctaws, who were the most cooperative of any Indian tribe with the United States. They wanted to be representatives of their people and keep the land that was being forced from them.

Missionaries were sent to the Southeast to bring “civilization” to these indigenous people. Missionaries believed that the best and only way to civilize and Christianize the natives was to educate them and teach them how to manage the ideal family roles as well as the Europeans. Men tended to the fields, chopped wood, hunted, and labored while the women did the household chores like cooking, cleaning, laundry, and child rearing. It was very different from the matrilineal system of other tribes. Once children entered these schools, they were stripped of their native name and provided a Christian name that they must only answer to. The Choctaw believed that if they cooperated and became part of society, they would soon have the same rights as others within the society. However, this was deemed to be just more lies from the government. “The Americans did not observe these treaties, and by the 1820s the Indians found themselves under increasing pressure to surrender their lands and move across the Mississippi.”¹⁰⁰

After Andrew Jackson took the office of Presidency in 1829, one of the first issues he was eager to address was the removal of all Native Americans from the Southeast. This included the Choctaws. His goal was to relocate them west to the other side of the Mississippi River, which made the newly vacant lands open for occupation by the white man. "On May 28, 1830 President Jackson's proposal became law in the form of the Removal Bill. This is known to the Choctaw as the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek after the place in which the treaty was signed."¹⁰¹ President Jackson thought he was offering a great deal to the Southeastern Indians by giving them a larger portion of land to govern as their own. It would take up parts of Arkansas, which would later be known as the state of Oklahoma. But, Jackson was mistaken. The southern states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana were their homes and they had to leave all their ancestral remains.

The agreement was that the Choctaw Indians would begin removal in 1831, with a third of the population moving each year, thus making the final removal in the winter of 1833. The winter was chosen so that people would not have to suffer from the heat; however, the winters, being the worst seen in years, proved to be brutal. Choctaws also suffered from being robbed by those escorting them to their new lands. Many died of disease along the way. "Of an estimated 20,000 who began the march, only 7000 survived."¹⁰²

"It was expressly stipulated in the treaty of 1830 that the Choctaws might in part remain until the fall of 1833, and that the lands within the Choctaw district should not be sold until then, with the obvious intention of preventing settlements

until that date.”¹⁰³ Governor Runnels from Yazoo, Mississippi tried to overturn this part of the treaty. The governor had become impatient and wanted to sell the land the Choctaw occupied, but the legislature shut him down.

Not all Choctaws chose to leave. Many stayed and sought to collect on the promise included in the treaty. Article XIV declared:

Each Choctaw head of a family being desirous to remain and become a citizen of the United States, shall be permitted to do so, by signing his intention with the Agent within six months from the ratification of this treaty, and he or she shall thereupon be entitled to a reservation of one section of six hundred and forty acres of land, to be bounded by sectional lines in survey; in like manner shall be entitled to one-half the quantity for each unmarried child which is living with him over 10 years of age to adjoin the location of the parent. If they reside upon said lands intending to become citizens of the States for five years after the ratification of this treaty, in that case a grant in fee simple shall issue; said reservation shall include the present improvement of the head of the family, or a portion of it. Persons who claim under this article shall not lose the privilege of a Choctaw citizen, but if they ever remove are not entitled to any portion of the Choctaw annuity.¹⁰⁴

Many of those who chose to stay were married to whites. They petitioned for rights to land. However, some were never granted what was rightly theirs.

The final treaty was the Treaty of the Confederacy of 1861 between the Confederacy and the Muscogees, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. It was an agreement that they would become allies to fight “for their common defense,

the security of their liberties and their mutual and general welfare, and bind themselves to help each other against all force to or attacks upon any or all of them, or account of their sovereignty independence country or any other positions whatsoever, and for the convenient management of the general interest and welfare of the Confederate Tribes or Nations..."¹⁰⁵ The Choctaw and other tribes in the new territory chose to join the Confederacy in their fight against the Union during the Civil War. With the loss of the Civil War, the Indians once again were at the mercy of the whites. Whites were permitted to move in on Indian Territory. "By 1890, seventy percent of the population of Indian territory was non-Indian. Pressure from settlers forced the government to hand over fifteen million acres of Indian land to the settlers. The full integration of Indian Territory into the United States was confirmed when it was renamed Oklahoma territory in 1900 and became a full state, called Oklahoma, in 1907. The Choctaw themselves became citizens of the state of Oklahoma."¹⁰⁶

Dawes Severalty Act of 1887

The reason seventy percent of the population of Indian Territory was white was due in part to the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Created by Congressman Henry Dawes of Massachusetts, "it was designed to encourage the breakup of the tribes and promote the assimilation of Indians into American society. Dawes' goal was to create independent farmers out of Indians — give them land and the tools for citizenship."¹⁰⁷

Originally, this Act was not created to include the Five Civilized Tribes: Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole. After six years in

retirement, Henry Dawes was asked to serve on a committee of three, known as the Dawes Commission, to speak to the Five Tribal leaders. The tribes did not want to cooperate. The Indians knew that the Commission's intention was to chop up their land. The Choctaws wanted it left whole for all their people to live on without individual borders. But there was nothing they could do. "By 1896 congressional frustration led to the passage of the first in a series of acts that increased the commission's powers and changed its character from a diplomatic mission to a judicial tribunal that decided who was eligible for tribal membership and what land they received."¹⁰⁸

Basically, the Commission was set in place to convince the tribes to agree to the Act before they were going to be forced to follow it. Now a new Act was created to do that. The Curtis Act of 1898 gave the Commission the power to begin accepting applications for the land. This signified that the land would be taken from the tribes and given as parcels of land to individuals. If a member wanted land, then he/she needed to act fast with an application. Not all those whom applied received land. Out of 250,000 applicants, only 101,000 were approved. These 101,000 "names were put on what are commonly called the "final rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes."¹⁰⁹

Of the 19,525,966 acres, only 15,794,000 acres were claimed. Some chose the money over the land. The remaining land was given away in allotments. "The commission reserved 125,497 acres for railroad rights-of-way, town sites, churches, schools, and cemeteries, and segregated 431,080 acres of Choctaw and Chickasaw land holding coal and asphalt deposits and 1,278,753

acres containing timber. These segregated lands were leased under government supervision and eventually auctioned."¹¹⁰ The allotted land that was sold totaled 3,174,988 acres. That is 3,174,988 more acres taken away from the people who once roamed the continent freely.

The Dawes Commission would oversee the financial sales of land and was responsible for keeping track of sales. Congress disbanded the Commission in 1914, and its unfinished business was transferred to the Five Civilized Tribes Agency in Muskogee, Oklahoma.¹¹¹

Emergence in the 20th Century

President Calvin Coolidge wanted to help the Indians become citizens of the United States. Prior to 1924, "some had acquired citizenship by marrying white men. Others received citizenship through military service, by receipt of allotments, or through special treaties or special statutes."¹¹² This left many natives without citizenship. President Coolidge recognized this and proposed a way all Natives would be given citizenship. He signed the Indian Citizen Act on June 2, 1924. The reason for Coolidge's ambition to help the Native Americans was a reason hidden in his family history. "Coolidge was our first president to acknowledge that he had "Indian Blood."¹¹³ Because of this, he was well received and liked by Native Americans.

President Coolidge would not be the last president to finally fight for the Native Americans. As a matter of fact, he was only starting a chain reaction that would begin to send the Choctaws on a path to gain their culture back. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, he enacted a program called "the

'New Deal' policies, which were designed as a response and focused on relief, recovery and reform" for those suffering from the results of the Great Depression.¹¹⁴ Within this New Deal, Roosevelt was able to respond to the 1928 "Meriam Report," which "was a government study which described the poverty and poor living conditions on the reservations, terrible disease and death rates, grossly inadequate care of the Indian children in the boarding schools, and destructive effects of the erosion of Indian land caused by the General Allotment Act."¹¹⁵ In the New Deal, he included the Indian Reorganization Act. Roosevelt wanted to give tribes the authority to govern themselves. The accomplishments of the "Indian Reorganization Act included the following:

- stopped the erosion of the tribal land base by ending the allotment of tribal land, extended the trust period for existing allotments, prohibited lands to be taken away from tribes without their consent, and authorized the Secretary of the Interior to accept additional tribal lands in trust and to proclaim new reservations on those lands
- Recognized tribal governments and sought to promote tribal self-government by encouraging tribes to adopt constitutions under Section 16 of the Act
- Established a revolving loan program for tribal development and set up specific tribal business charters under Section 17 of the Act
- Established a Native preference hire for jobs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs"¹¹⁶

The Choctaws of Mississippi would utilize this Act to help to develop The Constitution and By-Laws of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. It was ratified on April 20, 1945, and the United States Government Printing Office in Washington released it in 1946. The Constitution included the laws of establishing the Name, Territory, Membership, Governing Body, Elections, Community Organizations, Powers of the Tribal Council, and the Amendments. The By-Laws explained the Duties of Officers, Meeting, and the Adoption of business.¹¹⁷

Before the American Indian Movement can be addressed, we must look at what happened in the 1950s to understand why it led to activism. After WWII, The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was created to stand against the unfair living conditions and the lack of education opportunities and health coverage. In 1954, an important responsibility was transferred from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, now known as the Department of Health and Human Services, to where it has remained to this day as the Indian Health Service (IHS). The Indian Health Service's only focus was to provide health care services to American Indians.¹¹⁸ Also during the 1950s, the Federal Government turned the governing of tribes over to the state after recognizing a dozen tribes. States wanted to relocate Indians to cities. Tensions would build with the refusal of tribes to voluntarily become urbanized.

Throughout the United States, activists put themselves in positions for the public to hear them. Two hundred Native Americans seized Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay in 1969 for 19 months. They offered to buy the island for "\$24

in glass beads and red cloth."¹¹⁹ Again in 1973, Native Americans spoke out by taking over the South Dakota village of Wounded Knee; "meanwhile, another group of Native Americans established a settlement at Mount Rushmore to demonstrate Indian claims to the Black Hills."¹²⁰

The government transferred all responsibilities of distributing funds among organizations within the tribe, for example, health and educational systems. "This time it was through the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) in 1975, a very significant law delegating authority to Indian tribes to provide their own services created by the federal trust responsibility."¹²¹

"In the mid-1970s, the tribal constitution was amended so that a tribal chief is elected by the people, effectively establishing executive and legislative branches of Choctaw government. At the same time, the term of office for the tribal council members was increased to four years."¹²² With the unemployment at 80% for the Choctaw in the Southeast, they pushed for creation of more jobs. In order to address the problem themselves, they created a Tribal Construction company. "Tribal Chief Phillip Martin, then tribal chairman, and the tribal council saw an opportunity when the federal government provided funds to build low-income housing for tribal members."¹²³ Deborah Boykin conducted an interview with Tribal Chief Phillip Martin in 2002. When he recalled this time of rebuilding, he responded, ""We had to build an economy and we didn't have much to sell except a lot of labor and natural resources."¹²⁴

The Choctaw did not stop with construction. They knew they needed to draw in industries that would employ multiple people; they began contacting companies to come to Mississippi to open plants. In 1979, the first company, Pinckard Electric, opened a plant to make wiring harnesses for cars on the reservation. With persistence, many more plants would soon follow. "American Greetings opened a plant to hand-finish greeting cards. An automotive speaker plant, a direct-mail and printing operation, and a plastic-molding firm followed."¹²⁵

From this point on, the Choctaws were unstoppable. The 1980s would prove to be the ultimate era of laying their future for a lasting culture. They opened several shopping centers and a nursing home. But the golden opportunity came in 1988. "The U.S. Congress passed the National Indian Gaming Act in 1988. The law enables federally recognized tribes to operate casinos on reservations after negotiating a compact with states. The Choctaws opened the Silver Star Resort and Casino in 1994. The only land-based casino in Mississippi, the Silver Star employs more than 2,000 people and provides revenue that supports an array of tribal programs."¹²⁶ Economic growth continued with the development of a golf course, multiple shopping centers, and much more.

In 1994, changes were made to the Tribal Self-Governance Act. Instead of having only 20 federally recognized tribes, the federal government stated that they would accept up to 20 applications a year for tribal recognition. "In order to enter into a compact to provide their own services, tribes must first become 'mature contractors' which means that they have to complete three successful

years of 638 contracts with no audit exceptions. Following that, the tribe must successfully complete a self-governance planning grant.”¹²⁷ Although the federal government gave control to the tribes, there were still regulations of funds that were stipulated. There were limits of contracts and funds that a tribe could make before penalties would take effect as to how much funding of grants would be received. “Tribes that have 638 contracts draw down the money quarterly and do quarterly reports. Yearly audits are required if a tribe receives more than \$500,000 a year. The money for tribal 638 contracts flows through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which partly funds BIA administration costs.”¹²⁸ This still would not stop a cultural force from prospering.

Conclusion-Prosperity

Today, the Choctaw Nation is thriving economically and in population. To be more specific, The Mississippi Band of Choctaws has created a self-governing society which has gained cultural tradition to pass on to new generations. These traditions would first come in the form of cultural and legendary stories of how their people used to live on the lands before the white man invaded their territory.

With the growth in population, it can be seen as a future for an everlasting culture. In order to carry on this culture, the youth must be educated in their history. Education on reservations has been significant in continuing traditional culture. Along with regulated state standards, the Choctaw schools teach the Native language, the art of basket weaving and wood carving, and ritual and spiritual dancing. This is practiced and displayed for others to observe at festivals called “Pow Wows.”

The religion celebrated by America's first people is no longer practiced. The Sun has been replaced by the European belief system of Christianity. "Today, the Baptist denomination predominates among Choctaw in Oklahoma and Mississippi."¹²⁹ However, the burial practice of the "Cry Ceremonial" is observed by the surviving Choctaws.

Sporting events are an excellent way for Choctaws to show their athletic ability. Stickball has become a high school-recognized sport. This too is played with the participation of young people at festivals. "Reservation-based high schools often do very well in statewide contests. Running, road racing, and basketball have reached new heights of popularity, and one can often find tribal races and basketball tournaments on reservations, along with football."¹³⁰ Football and baseball has become a favorite sport as well.

Thanks to the Tribal Self-Governance, members of the Choctaw Nation in the Southeastern region of the United States will never suffer from poverty again. As long as a Choctaw is registered through the federally recognized tribe, financial assistance is available. Also, because these Native people never gave up, they are "one of the state's largest employers, operating 19 businesses and employing more than 7,800 people, not all of them tribal members. Tribal operations indirectly generate an additional 5,482 permanent jobs in Mississippi."¹³¹ Today, tribal businesses produce plastic cutlery for McDonald's and wiring components for Club Car, Inc., Caterpillar, and Ford Power Products, among others.¹³²

Since the early 1500s, the Europeans have tried to suppress the Indigenous people of the New World. Unbeknownst to the invaders, these people would never give up. Through all the hardships the Choctaw Nation had faced, the question at this point would be, "Would the Choctaw survive with their culture and values still intact?" The answer is "Yes!" Through perseverance, they prevailed and are now a prospering minority in the Southeast. Looking back on the history of the Choctaw Indians, the effect with the claim of invaders to the new lands was much greater than anyone could have ever foreseen. Chief Phillip Martin of the Chahta Enterprise under the Mississippi Band of Choctaws said it the best when he was interviewed by John Porretto, an Associated Press Writer, for an article titled "From Rags to Riches": "It boils down to self-determination, he said. What do you want to do for yourself? We're trying to rise up, and we're trying to bring everybody around here with us."¹³³

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