

Persistence of Pattern



In Mississippi
Choctaw
Culture

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Cover photograph:
Will E. Morris beating drum for ball-play dance.
Photograph by M. R. Harrington, 1908, negative number 2678, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, New York

The Mississippi Choctaws: A Pattern of Persistence

by John H. Peterson

The continued presence of Choctaw Indians in Mississippi demonstrates the truth of William Faulkner's description of the immortality of the spirit: "Man will not merely endure, he will prevail." Twice in history, it appeared that the Choctaw Indians would vanish from Mississippi. Twice they have emerged from times of trial to reassert their presence.

History shows a persistent pattern of efforts by the Choctaw to remain in the state and to retain their cultural identity. They have preserved tribal tradition, but at the same time, they have introduced new patterns necessary for survival.

In some historical cases, cultural patterns have continued due to circumstances—poverty, social isolation. But in others, the culture of a people is preserved through conscious preservation efforts. In order for the Choctaw to preserve cultural patterns—language, crafts, customs—they must also develop new economic, governmental, and educational structures that will permit them



Courtesy of Ernest M. Tingle

1. Choctaw ballplayer, tintype, c. 1860.

to live in viable Choctaw communities—communities able to pass along these traditional values. Persistence of tradition does not have to be an accident of circumstances; it can also be achieved through a collective will and determination. The Choctaw have demonstrated such a will.

The efforts of the Choctaws in the first decades of the nineteenth century to adapt to Anglo-American civilization are well known. They resisted Tecumpseh's call to other Indian tribes to join with the British in the War of 1812 and fight against the United States. Instead, the Choctaws joined with the United States in the Creek War and the War of 1812, winning the praise of the Mississippi legislature and General Andrew Jackson. The Choctaws began rapidly transforming their society by inviting Presbyterian missionaries to enter their territory and establish missions and schools. They began to develop a written legal code and to modify their traditional government to be more in accord with the constitutional practices of their white neighbors. Their assimilation ended when the Choctaws were selected to be the first of the Five Civilized Tribes of the southeast to be removed to Oklahoma.

With the seat of tribal government and schools removed to Oklahoma, there was little evidence of the progress of the preceding decades for those Choctaws who chose to remain in Mississippi exercising their rights under the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. In the decades following the initial removal in the winter of 1831-1832, Choctaws made efforts to obtain the land due them, only to see their homes and farm improvements stolen or destroyed. As late as the 1840s, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 Choctaws remained in Mississippi. As the possibilities of retaining land or property vanished, all but about 1,000 gradually accepted the inevitability of removal and departed for Oklahoma.

Those Choctaws who continued to resist removal were impoverished, without land they could call their own and without schools or churches. They gradually faded from public notice as the nation's attention became more directed to the conflicts that finally

Dr. John Peterson is director of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology, Mississippi State University. He has written extensively on the Mississippi Choctaw, with whom he has been closely associated since 1972.

erupted in the Civil War. By this time, the remaining Choctaws had become squatters on marginal farm land generally owned by absentee landowners who were holding the land for speculation. Although some Mississippi Choctaws were recruited to form a Choctaw unit in the Civil War, for the most part they remained outside this conflict and the confusion of the Reconstruction period.

Actually, the Choctaws remaining in Mississippi had no alternative but to remain as squatters, living in scattered communities located on less desirable lands in isolated districts. Since the society surrounding them was comprised of landowning whites and non-landowning slaves, there was no social role in southern society for a free, non-white, non-landowning Indian. Considering the ill treatment they received at the hands of whites and the absence of any suitable role for them in local society, it is not surprising that the remaining Choctaws were described as shy and reserved in their relationships with whites. With the departure of the more educated and acculturated elements in the early removal periods, the remaining Choctaws probably were more isolated from white influence than they had been since the arrival of the Presbyterian missionaries in 1818. They were to continue in this isolation from the 1840s until the late 1880s.

The Choctaws had lost not only the tribal government based on law passed in general council and schools and churches established with white assistance, but they had also lost much of the traditional government based on clan, moiety and township. Although the remaining Choctaws were generally the more traditional members of the tribe, the disruptions of the removals had broken up the larger of the traditional kinship groupings that regulated tribal affairs. The remaining isolated groups were limited to regulating local community affairs.

In the post-removal period, the only Choctaws who could aspire to equal social status with whites were those who were wealthy or educated. These individuals were



2. Chief Pushmataha led Choctaw forces against the Creek Indians in 1812 under the flag of the United States.

often of Indian-white parentage, such as Greenwood LeFlore, who became a plantation owner and was elected to the Mississippi legislature. It is questionable if a full-blooded Choctaw could have been accepted even if he had owned property and slaves. Thus the process of removal acted as a filter of the Choctaw population. Those full-blooded Choctaws who had accomplished anything in terms of economic wealth or education were forced by circumstances to go to Oklahoma; or, if they were acceptable to whites, i.e., mixed blood, they could remain in Mississippi as whites. Traditional Choctaws who remained in Mississippi did so as outcasts in the land of their birth, isolated from the rest of society, with little hope for changed circumstances for their children.

These traditional Choctaw farmers continued, in so far as possible, to maintain their way of life. Subsistence agriculture was supplemented by chickens and pigs and by hunting. The scattered communities continued to maintain relationships through social events, during which Choctaw stickball and social dancing remained major entertainments. From the smaller communities, where the choice of eligible marriage partners might be limited to kinsmen, young men visited larger neighboring communities seeking wives. In the larger communities, such as Bogue Chitto and Connehatta, individuals

were more likely to find their spouses within the individual community. Probably during this time some contact was maintained with white society through harvesting cotton and selling baskets on the barter system. Traditional Choctaw religious beliefs were retained, including the belief in spirits of nature, ghosts, witches, and “little men” of the forest. Choctaw doctors continued traditional healing practices and use of herbal medicine. The Choctaw language remained the primary language. The differences in spoken Choctaw among the major communities probably was accentuated during this period of isolation and separation.

Changes in these isolated communities did not develop until well after the Civil War and Reconstruction. As a result of the ending of slavery, the sharecropping system developed as a means of organizing agricultural labor. Landless people were given access to agricultural land, a shanty, and some degree of support or “furnish” while making a cotton crop. In return the crop was divided in shares, with the white landowner receiving the largest share. The proportion varied, depending on the amount of goods, agricultural equipment, and animals furnished the sharecropper. It was then possible for the Choctaws to enter the agricultural system on the same basis as non-landowning blacks and whites.

The Choctaws did not have much choice about entering into the sharecropping system. In the decades following the Civil War, the rural population in the Choctaw area of Mississippi increased, and much of the marginal land formerly owned by absentee owners was purchased by individuals who became active farmers. Additionally, an acute labor shortage developed in east central Mississippi during that period as black laborers were recruited to move to the Mississippi Delta where land clearing and drainage operations were opening up rich agricultural land. Thus at the same time that the Choctaws were losing the free use of unoccupied lands, the new purchasers’ only source for local agricultural labor was the Choctaws. Most



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

3. Chief Greenwood LeFlore negotiated the final removal treaty at Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830

Choctaws gradually passed from being squatters to being sharecroppers on the same land that had been theirs before removal. Some Choctaw families have maintained oral traditions about this phenomenon.

While sharecropping offered no economic advantage to the Choctaws as compared with their separate existence as squatters, it did make it possible for them to enter into closer relations with both black and white Mississippians. They were also able to develop schools and churches again, as they had been without either during the forty-five years following removal.

Choctaw literacy in Mississippi had probably almost, if not completely, vanished, and most remaining Choctaws were at this time non-Christians. In 1879, there was recorded the first conversion of a Mississippi Choctaw to Christianity since removal. Within fifteen years churches were established in most Choctaw communities, where their services competed successfully with social dances and stickball as community

social activities. During the same period, the majority of Indian children in communities with Indian churches were enrolled in school, usually held in the neighborhood Choctaw church. Although the Mississippi Choctaws received some assistance from the state government for the schools and from local missionary societies to bring Choctaw pastors from Oklahoma, the development depended in a large degree on Choctaw initiative.

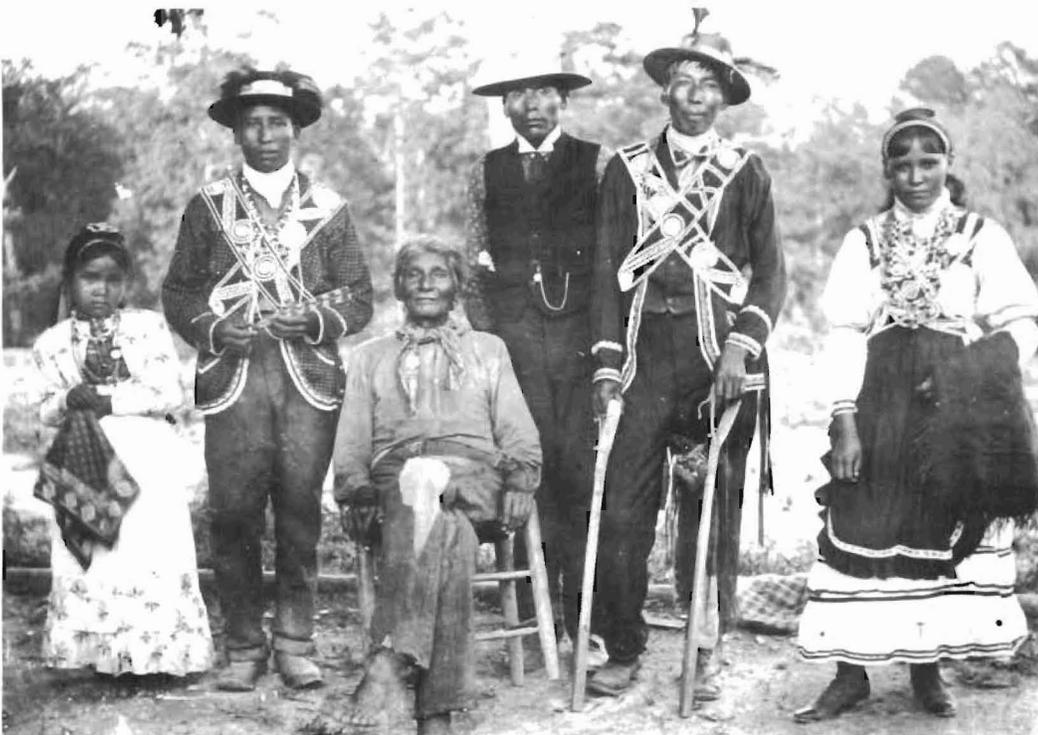
By 1900, the Choctaws had experienced some twenty years of developing stable rural communities that were centered around the Choctaw church and school and remained distinctively Choctaw. The majority of Indian students were in school; in Connehatta, the adults even formed a local debating society. Only in Bogue Chitto did the community resist the churches and schools, with traditional leaders prophesying that with these institutions would come removal.

Unfortunately, these Choctaw prophets proved correct. As part of the dismantling of the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory to create the state of Oklahoma, the Mississippi Choctaws were offered a possibility of participating in the assignment of allotments in Oklahoma. In 1903, the Federal Government assisted in the removal of some Choctaws, while others were moved by land speculators who hoped to gain control of their allotments. The local Choctaw communities in Mississippi were again completely disrupted. Several communities sold their churches and moved as a group. The system of Choctaw schools was discontinued by the state of Mississippi.

In the decade that followed, many of these Mississippi Choctaws were cheated of the lands they were to receive in Oklahoma and returned to Mississippi only to find the remaining Choctaw communities scattered and their schools and churches no longer existing. As in the first period of removals, the more traditional Choctaws resisted the removal efforts. Thus the traditional customs

remained largely intact, centered around the Choctaw language, social dances, and traditional food and dress, but now also including in many communities the Choctaw church. Nevertheless, the population had been reduced from between 2000 and 3000 in 1903 to a little over 1000 in the United States census of 1910. The Mississippi Choctaws were then further decimated by the great influenza epidemic of 1918.

It was at this low point in Choctaw fortunes in Mississippi that the United States Congress became aware of the tragic results of the second removal effort and the influenza epidemic. The Mississippi Choctaws were finally given recognition as an Indian tribe in 1918 and the process begun of building a reservation, a school system, and a hospital. Even with this government assistance, the road back was difficult. The Mississippi Choctaws never received a major appropriation of funds to purchase land or develop schools and a hospital. Assistance was in the form of small annual appropriations. It took over twelve years before an elementary school was built in each of the Choctaw communities. One of the largest communities, Bogue Chitto, did not have a school until 1930. A land purchase program also went slowly. During the 1920s and 1930s Choctaw efforts at economic development through farming was doomed to failure through disastrously low farm prices and the boll weevil. Then the Bureau of Indian Affairs lost much of its staff during the war years from 1940 to 1945. Therefore, isolation for the Mississippi Choctaws did not suddenly end in 1918, but rather slowly diminished. Mississippi Choctaw students did not graduate from high school until the 1950s; those graduates are now the leaders of the tribe. A high school for the Mississippi Choctaws was not established until 1954. Through the 1960s the acute racial discrimination blocked local employment opportunities for the Choctaws and maintained their social isolation. During the 1950s and 1960s, the tribe experienced heavy outmigration because it appeared economic success was possible only for individuals and families who left Mississippi.



Courtesy of The Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

4. Choctaw family group photographed by M. R. Harrington in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in 1908.

During the 1960s, however, Mississippi Choctaws again began to assert themselves in self-initiated efforts to develop their own communities. This tribal characteristic has become so well known that it has earned its own appellation: Choctaw Self-Determination. Over a twenty-year period, in addition to contracting with the Department of Interior to operate most of the governmental programs on the Choctaw reservation, the Choctaws have launched a major effort in economic development. This effort has attracted national publicity in the 1980s as an outstanding example of Indian industrial development. The Mississippi Choctaws now operate a total of six industries located in Choctaw communities in three counties, in addition to the tribally owned construction company. Visitors to these Choctaw electronic component assembly plants are constantly impressed with the emphasis on quality of production. Is this a new development among the Choctaws of Mississippi or is it the

reassertion in a new form of an older tradition of craftsmanship, hard work, and community cooperation? These recent developments are gratifying; but Choctaws remember that twice before their determined efforts to develop their communities have failed through policy decisions over which they had little control.

The Mississippi Choctaw history challenges our perception of the Choctaws and other Indians as well as other folk cultures black and white. Many historians characterize Mississippi Choctaws as a group, daunted by the removals of the 1830s and 1840s, that was not able to adapt to and succeed as part of the wider culture in which they found themselves. They assume that the traditional culture was retained only through poverty and isolation. If this is all there is to Choctaw history, then we are correct in seeing them as passive objects of forces beyond their control or understanding.



Courtesy of Jack Com

5. Today Chief Phillip Martin presides over unparalleled economic progress and development among the Mississippi Choctaw.

The alternative is to recognize that the Choctaws and other groups are capable of responding and taking charge of their own development. They have demonstrated this potential when given an opportunity along with direct and practical assistance. The Mississippi Choctaws have adapted while retaining their culture, traditions and identity. The Choctaws have suffered setbacks only when state and federal policy denied them the opportunity to succeed. It is important for us to realize that the Choctaws have been active in their history, not passively “Lost in the Hills of Home,” as one historian has described them.

Choctaw identity, Choctaw language, and Choctaw customs, together with the Choctaw willingness to work and to respond to oppor-

tunity, have carried the Mississippi Choctaws through two periods of bitter losses. Choctaw tradition and pride must be given credit for carrying the Choctaw people through these low points. We can only hope that the future being built today in the Choctaw communities will not be destroyed as has occurred twice in the past. Regardless of the future for the Mississippi Choctaws, it seems evident that an important element will be a continued pride in being able to say, “Chahta hapia hoke”—“We are Choctaw.”

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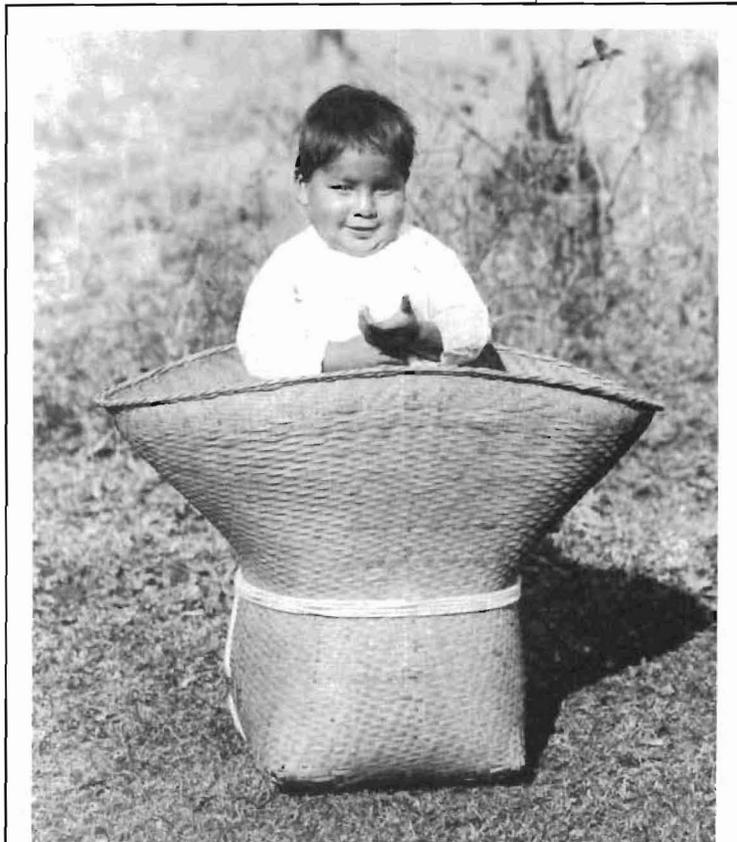
Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

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Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

6. Choctaw baby in burden basket, 1909

“Something Tells Me This Feeling About the Land is the Old Choctaw Religion”: The Persistence of Choctaw Culture in Mississippi since 1830 by Cheri L. Wolfe

Cheri Wolfe is statewide coordinator of folk arts on the staff of the Mississippi State Historical Museum, a division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. She served as curator of the exhibition.

¹ Gideon Lincecum, unspecified newspaper sketch in *The Galveston & Dallas News*, n.d. Quoted in Franklin Riley's notes to Lincecum, "Life of Apushmataha." In *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*. Vol. IX(1906):115.

² Mary Young, *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks: Indian Allotments in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi, 1830-1860*. (Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 71.

³ *Chata* (actual spelling of the word *Choctaw*)

⁴ *Nanah Waiya* is variously translated as "fish lot of," "leaning hill," and "a place of creation."

⁵ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, "Jones County."

⁶ Susan Weills, *The Mississippi Choctaw: Their Own Story*. Transcript from videotaped interview with Effie Lillie, 1984.

⁷ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Grace Smith.

⁸ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, "Winston County."

Gideon Lincecum, ardent admirer and advisor to the Choctaw, observed, "they would not voluntarily submit to any restraint which would deprive them of entire freedom of action. And this sentiment pervaded all ages and conditions of life."¹ Although Lincecum was describing the Mississippi Choctaw of the early nineteenth century, he easily could have been characterizing the Choctaw of our own time. For over 150 years the tribe has fought for the freedom to be Choctaw. Today, although the struggle continues, Choctaw identity is readily apparent in women's clothing, ball-play, beadwork, basketry, language, and dance. Less obvious, but no less pervasive, is Choctaw ideology. These cultural elements, while persistent, have been altered to fit the changing, evolving needs of the Choctaw. Indeed, from first European contact the Choctaw adopted useful aspects of white lifestyle while they abandoned elements of their own culture that were no longer pertinent. For the most part, however, Choctaw culture and distinctive tribal identity persevered.

For too long historians have emphasized Choctaw interaction with and reaction to what came to be the dominant American culture. The Choctaw are seen in terms of American society: with the establishment of schools and churches the Choctaw were "progressing" in the 1820s; with Reconstruction and the advent of sharecropping, we are told, the Choctaw at last "fit" in Mississippi. Scholars habitually refer to the "First" and "Second Removal" (to Oklahoma Indian Territory in 1830 & 1903 respectively); they divide Choctaw history into segments delineated by United States treaties with the Choctaw nation. History textbooks ethnocentrically conclude that the Choctaw were a "band of wanderers... who remained in Mississippi (and) became itinerant agricultural laborers and ultimately achieved the status of sharecroppers."²

It is time to see the Choctaw in their own terms, to recognize the depth of tribal feeling for the Mississippi homeland. Traditional lifeways (settlement and land use patterns, housing, theology and sex roles) remained

strong components of Choctaw identity. It is important to recognize that the Choctaw evolved and continued to change; yet their choices have been consistent, they are patterned. Which cultural elements remained viable, how did they evolve, and why? This exhibit and catalogue are preliminary attempts to probe such complex and intriguing issues.

From distant lands west of the Mississippi River the Chata³ are said to have come to settle in present-day Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Chata origin myths describe a wandering people led by a spirit pole, much as the Israelites were guided by a pillar of cloud to the Promised Land. The long, arduous trip claimed many lives, and those who survived carried the bones of their dead. According to the Choctaw, ancestral bones are buried at the Nanah Waiya⁴ mound in east-central Mississippi. One legend, passed from generation to generation, illustrates Chata attachment to Nanah Waiya and to Mississippi. Standing on the leaning mound, Indian prophet Book Bearer announced, "I give you these hunting grounds for your homes. The land, the forests, and streams are yours. When you leave them, you die."⁵ Then, Book Bearer disappeared into the mound. Nanah Waiya's strong, mystical appeal is felt by contemporary members of the tribe. Effie Lilly testifies, "When I go over there, I can feel it. I feel like somebody's there..."⁶ No less fervent, Grace Smith says, "There's a good feeling at the mound for me. It must be something...one of these days I'm going to talk to someone, some old Choctaw man, and see what it is."⁷

At the center of the Choctaw Nation and situated at the headwaters of the Pearl River, Nanah Waiya is thought to have been the site of national tribal councils. According to oral tradition, smaller, more localized, tribal meetings were held at various area locations including the banks of Dancing Rabbit Creek⁸ (site of the 1830 Treaty in which the Choctaw ceded their remaining Mississippi homeland and agreed to move west). Cameron Wesley,



7. Nanih Waiya Mound, early 1900s

the last chief of the Choctaw,⁹ is buried near Nanih Waiya, at the treaty site. His son Barney says, “He told us he wanted to be buried here. He said he wanted to spend the rest of time at this treaty ground... he wouldn’t give up. He felt like it was Choctaw land anyway, even if the white men said they owned it.” Barney thinks that his father stayed at Dancing Rabbit “so other people would remember.”¹⁰

In 1830, pressured by white settlers who wanted Mississippi lands open, government officials from Washington met three Choctaw district chiefs at Dancing Rabbit Creek. These three leaders represented the three geographical divisions of the tribe: Greenwood LeFlore from the western “long people,” Moshulitubbee of the northeastern “potato eating” people, and Nutakachi from southern “Six Towns.”¹¹ Along with the chiefs and captains, approximately 6,000 Choctaws were present at the negotiations. In his *Memorial to the U. S. Congress on Behalf of the Choctaw Indians*, Andrew Hays wrote in 1836 that “a very large majority of them positively refused to cede their country to the U. S.”¹² According to historian Richard White, “the

mass of Choctaws both rejected removal and feared the impact of Mississippi’s laws” (which stipulated a \$1,000 fine and one-year imprisonment for any Choctaws who challenged the state’s authority).¹³ When the talks at Dancing Rabbit Creek reached a stalemate, most of the Choctaws left for home. In their absence Greenwood LeFlore, the young half-breed western or “long-people” chief, proposed an amendment to the treaty. He suggested that those Choctaws desiring to remain in Mississippi be allowed to do so. When news of this development reached the departing Choctaws, they immediately returned to the treaty site, “disavowing the treaty and denouncing LeFlore and his party as traitors.”¹⁴ According to Hays, LeFlore would have been executed instantly if not for white intervention. When the commissioners assured the tribal members they could remain on their Mississippi lands, the Choctaw “reluctantly” agreed to sign the treaty. In 1901, based on the written record and oral tradition, H. S. Halbert opined that the Choctaw people believed “their chiefs had exceeded their authority in making this treaty.”¹⁵

⁹ In the traditional Choctaw manner, Cameron Wesley was selected as chief by mutual consent of those in his community. A ballot/voting system now validates the official Chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

¹⁰ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Barney Wesley.

¹¹ H. S. Halbert, “The Indians in Mississippi and Their Schools (1896).” In *A Choctaw Source Book*. Edited by John Peterson (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985), 534.

¹² Andrew Hays, *Memorial to the U. S. Congress on Behalf of the Choctaw Indians*. Washington City, 1836, 3.

¹³ Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment & Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*. (Lincoln & London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983), 140-142.

¹⁴ Hays, *Memorial*, 3.

¹⁵ H. S. Halbert, “The Last Indian Council on Noxubee River.” In *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, Vol. IV(1901): 279.

¹⁶ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Rosalie Steves.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, transcript from videotaped interview with Linda Farve.

¹⁸ Young, *Redskins*, 48.

¹⁹ Mississippi Department of Archives & History, Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Humphreys County."

²⁰ Young, *Redskins*, 48.

²¹ James Loewen & Charles Sallis, eds., *Mississippi: Conflict & Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 51, and Ronald Satz, "From the Removal Treaty Onward." In *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*. Edited by Samuel Wells & Roseanna Tubby (Jackson & London: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1986), 5.

²² Young, *Redskins*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁴ Hays, *Memorial*, 7.

²⁵ Stick bundles (with each stick representing a single unit) was a traditional Choctaw method of calculation.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

The contemporary Choctaws have various explanations for the unacceptable behavior of their chiefs. Rosalie Steve laments, "I don't think that the Choctaw would have signed away their land in 1830 if they had been better educated."¹⁶ Linda Farve says, "I think we had weak leaders in the 1800s, when our land was signed away by treaties... If they were full-blooded Indians I don't think they would have signed so quickly, like Greenwood LeFlore. Another thing our ancestors tell us is that they weren't sober when they signed those treaties."¹⁷

At the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek the Choctaw ceded a total of 10,423,139.69 acres.¹⁸ All told, approximately 95 percent of the Choctaw tribe began the move west where, they were assured, they would not be disturbed. (Hindsight shows otherwise.) It was painful for Choctaws to give up their homeland. Sam Dale, Indian scout and friend to the Choctaw, was among those hired by the federal government to help remove the tribe to Oklahoma. He provided these observations for posterity: "I found the great body of the Choctaws very sad; making no arrangements until the last moment to remove... and when we camped at night many of them stole back in the darkness twenty, thirty, and even forty, miles to take a last fond look at the graves of the household..."¹⁹

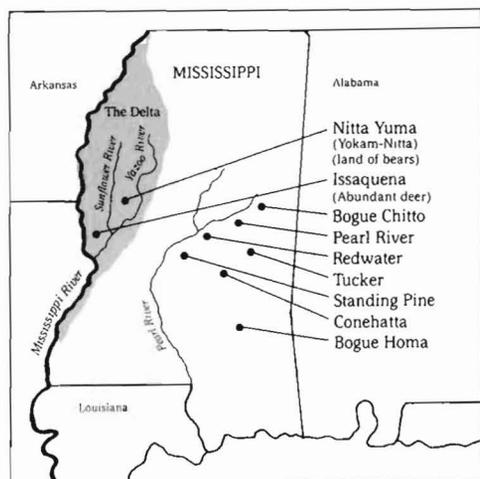
The treaty included three provisions for individual land allotment in Mississippi. First, tribal leaders and "various men whose services, needs or influence"²⁰ deserved reward, were given land. Some historians have called these awards "bribes."²¹ The remunerative land could be located anywhere in the Choctaw cession, and most sold their claims.²² Under the second provision, Article Nineteen, heads of families received 80 to 320 acres around their "improvements." This acreage was determined in proportion to amount of land under "cultivation." Most of this land, too, was sold to pay debts or to finance the move west. The fourteenth article, as historian Mary Young aptly noted, turned the Choctaws into homesteaders. Tribal members were to be granted land and citizenship if they registered their improved claims within six months Senate ratification (August

24, 1831) and if they retained that land for a five-year period.²³

Some Choctaws endeavored to take advantage of the fourteenth amendment and claim their land. Often, though, public land sales illegally preceded Choctaw attempts to register claims. Land speculators robbed the Choctaw of vast acreage, while greedy settlers burned some of their homes. Most devastating, however, were the unrealistic provisions of the fourteenth amendment and the drunken, irresponsible behavior of Col. William Ward, the Indian agent in charge of administering the treaty provision.

American ethnocentric provisions and attitudes are evidenced in the fourteenth amendment. As Hays pointed out, the six-month grace period during which the Choctaw could register for land was "very limited" for a people scattered across such extensive country. Communication was certainly a problem. Moreover, Hays accused the government's emissaries of knowing full well that "all North American Indians do their business through their mingos and chiefs."²⁴ To require the Choctaws to register independently and individually was absurd, given the Choctaw social structure.

The Choctaw did try to record land claims. H. S. Halbert gave a detailed account of the attempt made by the Six Towns people. Nearly all of the Six Towns Choctaw met at council; delegates were appointed to approach Ward and to list the names of Six Towns heads of families who wished to remain in Mississippi. Then, separate enumerators were named for every village; these men counted the Choctaw heads of families for their specific villages. In time the delegates duly visited Col. Ward. For his part, Ward registered but few of the names; growing tired, he told the delegates to return at a later date. In the meantime, the agent lost the book containing those names he had obtained. At the later date a drunken Ward complained that too many Choctaws wanted to stay in Mississippi. He discarded the representative stick bundles²⁵ Six Towns people had laboriously assembled. The agent later defended himself by claiming that each Indian, by law, "must apply for himself."²⁶ Harry Cantwell, attorney



8. Mississippi map illustrates interior Delta hunting grounds and seven contemporary Choctaw reservations.

for Mississippi Choctaw claimants, reproached Congress. He charged that the fourteenth article was “inserted in the treaty for the express purpose of individualizing the Indian, of breaking up tribal organization, and subjecting him to the laws of the white man and making him a citizen of the U.S.”²⁷

At the hands of government commissioners, Indian Agent Ward, land speculators, and white settlers, an entire Choctaw generation suffered removal. For more than twenty years the Choctaw people grappled with the removal issue. Facing life under Mississippi’s legal system rather than tribal law, 14,000 Choctaws moved in the initial five years.²⁸ In the four-year period 1845-49, 5,120 Choctaws left Mississippi. Another 600 individuals migrated during 1853-1854. By 1860, only 1,000 Choctaws persistently remained in the state.²⁹

The Choctaws seemingly felt no obligation to state laws pertaining to land ownership. In 1867 a case involving Choctaw land was heard by the Mississippi Supreme Court. Ironically (as we shall later see), some Indian land in the Delta had been sold for a five percent levee tax. The legal issue was: Could Indian land be assessed and sold for taxes? The Supreme Court upheld the legality of a tax sale by virtue of the fourteenth article of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, in which the Choctaws were granted citizenship. By implication they accepted its responsibilities, including taxation.³⁰ What is important here, though, is not the question of citizenship,

nor even whether or not the Choctaws in question could afford to pay the tax. More fundamental is the Choctaw belief that the Choctaw stood, somehow, outside Mississippi’s legal system.

Except in dire emergency (their Delta land sold), the Choctaw ignored white government. The tribe preferred and indeed expected that same courtesy. H. S. Halbert claimed that the Choctaws who stayed in Mississippi “felt confident that the government would not turn them off.”³¹ In point of fact, they were correct. In 1936, when the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided that the Choctaw should be “fitted into a reservation system,” the agency dispatched anthropologist Charles Wisdom to Mississippi. On the basis of a two-and-one-half-month field study, Wisdom recommended “as much as possible land should be acquired in or near the traditional Choctaw homesites.”³² The BIA took Wisdom’s advice.

The Choctaws have remained on or near their pre-removal village sites in east-central Mississippi. Of the Six Towns people he knew best, H. S. Halbert observed in 1899: “a large settlement of them live within the bounds of their (historic) township.”³³ Indeed, Halbert specified several communities located near (sometimes with the same name as) those identified by United States Indian Agent Douglas Cooper in an 1856 census report. Going one step further in this geographical lineage, Cooper’s 1856 census revealed ten communities, the locations of which roughly correspond to those (post-European contact) sites noted by the Bureau of Ethnology scholar, John Swanton. For example, Swanton’s map of Choctaw towns places at least seventeen villages in the area of Kemper County.³⁴ In 1856 Cooper visited the Talla Chulak community in Kemper. In 1896, Halbert referred to the Tali-Chuluk village of southwestern Kemper. Today, Kemper County is the home of the Bogue Chitto Community.

Not only did the Choctaws remain in the same geographical areas in Mississippi, but they also continued traditional building

²⁷ U.S. Congress Committee on Indian Affairs. *Statement of Harry J. Cantwell of Crews & Cantwell, Attorneys for Mississippi Choctaw Claimants to the Committee on Indian Affairs of 62nd Congress, 2nd Session, 1912*, 5.

²⁸ Clara Kidwell, “The Choctaw Struggle for Land & Identity in Mississippi, 1830-1918,” in Wells, *After Removal*, 68.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁰ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Coahoma County.”

³¹ Halbert, “Last Indian Council,” *Source Book*, 277.

³² Charles Wisdom, collaborator, *Socio-Economic Report on the Mississippi Choctaw*. Report from Applied Anthropology Unit of the Office of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior-Choctaw Agency, 1936. Recommendation Number 2.

³³ Halbert, “The Indians in Mississippi and Their Schools (1896),” *Source Book*, 536.

³⁴ John Swanton, *Source Material for the Social & Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 103. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 54.



*Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History,
Smithsonian Institution*

9. Note thatching arrangement, Choctaw palmetto house, c. 1879

10. Note planking pattern, Choctaw house, c. 1860s

*Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History,
Smithsonian Institution*



practices and construction techniques for their permanent homes. Numerous reports describing the nineteenth century Choctaw homes coincide with an eighteenth century account of tribal housing. The French found the Choctaws in permanent houses "made of wooden posts of the size of the leg, buried in the earth (at one end) and fastened together with... very flexible bands. The rest of the wall is of mud... The cabins are covered with bark of the cypress or pine."³⁵ In George County in the mid-nineteenth century, "their houses were built of poles and covered with pine bark which was mixed with mud."³⁶ At a temporary Choctaw camp in Osyka one man described tribal construction techniques: "their homes were made of pine boughs and palmetto and they would often have pieces of old tents thrown over the top to keep out the rain."³⁷ According to Bushnell's research among the Louisiana Choctaw, even if permanent structures were planked with lumber the planking was arranged in the same way as palmetto and thatch.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, "George County."

³⁷ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, "Pike County."

³⁸ David I. Bushnell, Jr., *The Choctaw of Bayou Lacomb, St. Tamany Parish, Louisiana*. Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 48, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 7.

The Choctaw floorplan was simply one room. An eighteenth-century French manuscript describes permanent Choctaw cabins in which “there are no windows and the door is only from three to four feet in height... a hole is left at the top of each gable end to let the smoke out.”³⁹ Again, an account of late nineteenth-century Mississippi bears testimony to Choctaw houses “always rude, windowless and poorly ventilated...”⁴⁰ Cooking was done outside. Into the twentieth century an average Choctaw house was described as “a little log hut, I suppose about 16 feet square, with no furniture in it and only a dirt floor...” The narrator continued, “I have been in a good many houses... a large percentage of them that do the cooking right out in the open yet.”⁴¹

Although evidence suggests that the Choctaw had, to some degree, adopted white housetypes, we should not take this to mean that the tribe also incorporated the white concept of living space. Certainly historian Cushman related that some Choctaws lived in two-room log houses comparable to white homes. Yet, in the 1930s one WPA author observed of the Bogue Homa Community: “sometimes there are several rooms in a home, but more often the Indians prefer to live bundled up together in one room and it is nothing unusual to find children, parents, grandparents and other relatives living together in one large room.”⁴² Donie Willis’s reaction to a government house in the 1970s poignantly illustrates Choctaw devotion to traditional tribal homes. She says, “When this new house was built for me, I didn’t want to live in it. The log cabin (her childhood home built circa 1890s) didn’t have windows, but the new house did. I was afraid people would look in on me. So I didn’t move into this new house until the cabin started to cave in.”⁴³



11. Donie Willis’s childhood home, c. 1890s



12. Donie Willis’s government house, c. 1970s

The preceding lengthy discussion improves our understanding of Choctaw building traditions and attitudes toward living space. These cultural concepts were maintained throughout the nineteenth century and are apparent today among some Choctaws. Choctaw homes that appeared “squalid” to white observers were in fact traditional.⁴⁴

The Choctaws historically situated their east-central Mississippi homes and villages “on the terraces of the streams that flowed into the Pearl, Tombigbee and Chickasawhay rivers rather than along the rivers themselves.”⁴⁵ Tribal members built their homes high above the floodprone rivers. Within archaeologist John Blitz’s central Kemper county study area, the “Choctaw settlement pattern was characterized by small, dispersed

³⁹ Swanton, *Source Material*, 37.

⁴⁰ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, “Walthall County.”

⁴¹ In this particular house a small back room and a covered porch had been added. The Choctaw owner expressed his intent to buy furniture as well. Mayor J. D. Pace’s testimony would seem to indicate that these “improvements,” however, were unusual. U.S. Congress Committee of Investigations of Indian Service, *Hearings*. Vol. 2, *Conditions of the Mississippi Choctaws*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 179.

⁴² Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, “Jones County.”

⁴³ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Donie Willis.

⁴⁴ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, “Kemper County.”

⁴⁵ White, *Roots*, 13.

⁴⁶ John Blitz, *An Archaeological Study of the Mississippi Choctaw Indians*. Report Number 16. (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Dept. of Archives & History, 1985), 41.

⁴⁷ Rufus Ward, "Choctaw Farmsteads in Mississippi, 1830," in Wells, *After Removal*, 34.

⁴⁸ White, *Roots*, 135.

⁴⁹ The Bureau of Ethnology's John Swanton postulated that all memory of Choctaw communal plots had been lost by the 1930s. Swanton even questioned whether such communal cultivation practices had ever existed. These Hancock and Kemper County examples certainly prove otherwise.

⁵⁰ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration. Record Group 60, "Hancock County."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, "Kemper County."

⁵² Kidwell, *Choctaw Struggle*, 81.

⁵³ White, *Roots*, 26.

⁵⁴ T.N. Campbell, "Choctaw Subsistence: Ethnographic notes from the Lincecum Manuscript," in *The North American Indian Series*, edited by Charles Hudson (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), 11.

⁵⁵ Blitz, *Archaeological Study*, 17.

settlements clustered along low ridges."⁴⁶ In Oktibbeha, Clay, and Lowndes counties, Rufus Ward located cultivated land in the creek bottoms, houses on the first terrace, and enclosures on terraces adjacent to the creek bottom.⁴⁷

Reserving the higher, drier ridges for their individual house sites and small family garden plots, the Choctaw communally cultivated the rich flood plain lands. The Choctaw continued their cultivation patterns long after the 1830 removal. In 1831, according to historian Richard White, 80 percent of the Choctaw Nation's farmers cultivated less than 10 acres. Among the Six Towns section (the most traditional peoples), the average family planted only 4.5 acres.⁴⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century records are numerous scattered references to the small, individual patches cultivated by tribal members.

There is some evidence that the Choctaw maintained communal agricultural practices.⁴⁹ In Hancock County, along Mississippi's Gulf Coast, the main Choctaw crop was rice. In the 1930s Ms. Lem Favre, who had lived in a coastal Choctaw settlement, provided the basis for the following account:

When the rice was ready to harvest the stalks were cut and carried into a log cabin built in the center of the settlement and in which a log, window high, was placed. The stalks were beaten over this log to separate the grains. The floor of the cabin had been especially prepared by sanding (scrubbing with sand) to catch the rice grains as they fell. They were then gathered and placed in a bowl, which was in reality the end of a log which had been hollowed out into the shape of a bowl by burning. Two women, each with a mull, pounded the grains until all husks were removed. These husks were then fanned out with palmetto fans.⁵⁰

In Kemper County in the 1930s was a section of land "located in the northwest part of district four, known as the 'Eye Sleeper Estate' the name being derived from their Chief Eye Sleeper... there [were] about 25 or more Indians on this tract. They [had] one

community cotton patch and when they [sold] this cotton, they [paid] the taxes."⁵¹

Historians have been quick to note that the post-removal Choctaw were pushed onto marginal lands. Clara Kidwell, for example, described the Choctaws as "squatters on unoccupied land of poor quality."⁵² Such terms as "squatters" and "poor quality" imply American value judgements. As we have seen, the Choctaw historically lived in east-central Mississippi (one of the state's least fertile areas) and on higher elevations (certainly "poorer" land than that found along the rivers and streams).

Choctaw traditional land use practices were but part of the larger tribal pattern of living off the Mississippi land. Richard White noted that the Choctaw did not rely exclusively on agriculture; such dependence would have made them vulnerable to famine during drought. White estimates that in the pre-removal period the Choctaws cultivated crops for two-thirds of their diet while the remaining one third they obtained from hunting, fishing, and gathering.⁵³ For the women, the spring and summer meant planting. Old people and children helped women gather plants and nuts. After spring planting, the Choctaws dispersed to go fishing. The tribe convened at midsummer for the Green Corn Dance, and then separated again until harvest time.⁵⁴ In the cold months (fall and winter) the men hunted large game animals like the deer. Men and boys hunted smaller animals year-round, especially in the summer. One scholar guessed that these hunting activities originally took place locally, and that long trips were devoted only to large game animals.⁵⁵ Simpson Tubby's testimony bore this out; he identified several small-animal hunting areas—Pigeon roost near Macon, and "squirrel country," nine miles east of Philadelphia—that were situated near the home villages in central Mississippi. The one large-animal hunting ground that he noted was near the Tombigbee River, in the north-



Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

13. Toshkachito holding blow gun in shooting position, 1909

eastern part of the state and a journey of several days.⁵⁶

With the coming of the Europeans (and the introduction of fur trade and a market economy) a complex process began which altered the Choctaw aboriginal subsistence system. Game animals, especially deer, became a source of wealth. By the late eighteenth century, large game was scarce around the eastern Mississippi lands. The Choctaw began migrating to hunting grounds west of the Mississippi River in search of game. They wintered in the Red and Arkansas river valleys.⁵⁷ According to White, "as the trans-Mississippi hunting grounds grew in importance, small hunting groups began to identify their interests more with the western lands than with their homeland."⁵⁸ By 1816 an estimated 1500 Choctaws settled west of the Mississippi River. The majority of the Choctaws, however, saw the hunt only as a temporary excursion. For the Choctaw in Mississippi, a pattern of migrating west to hunt was firmly established.

The Choctaws who chose to remain in Mississippi were, in fact, the most traditional. It is not surprising then, that they continued seasonal hunting migrations. In the post-removal period "some still travelled west of the Mississippi to hunt as had been a traditional custom."⁵⁹ Tubby confirmed that in the

1860s "it was customary for the Choctaw to scatter annually into camps from forty to a hundred miles from home. They set out early in the fall and returned to their reserved lands at the opening of spring to prepare their gardens."⁶⁰ H. S. Halbert found it a "hard matter to keep up a school during the winter months."⁶¹ He credited this difficulty to the nomadic Choctaw lifestyle in which household expenses were "economized" as the tribe primarily depended upon hunting during the winter months. "On their return, at the close of winter, they find their supply of home provender... (corn, peas and potatoes [which] remained under the charge of a friend or relative, undiminished and undisturbed at home)... sufficient to help them raise their coming crop."⁶²

After 1830 the Choctaw hunted wherever large game could be found in Mississippi. For the most part, however, the Choctaw concentrated their big game hunting efforts in the interior Mississippi Delta. The Delta was a prime hunting ground. This backwoods interior was undeveloped as late as the 1880s (which saw the coming of cotton planters and the railroad). Moreover, the Delta's fertile land was interlaced with rivers which overflowed their banks during the spring and winter floods. There was no hunting in the spring,

⁵⁶ Swanton, *Source Material*, 54.

⁵⁷ White, *Roots*, 92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁹ Kidwell, *Choctaw Struggle*, 74.

⁶⁰ Swanton, *Source Material*, 161.

⁶¹ Halbert, "Indians in Mississippi," *Source Book*, 539.

⁶² *Ibid.*



Courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art

14. "Louisiana Indians Walking along a Bayou" (Choctaw), painting by Alfred Boisseau, 1847

when game animals bore their young; but winter saw the Choctaw hunters in numbers. During the overflows the wild animals fled to higher ground where they were relatively easy prey. Pearl McNeal's 1936 exposé regarding Choctaw hunting grounds in the "vicinity of Vicksburg 50 years ago" (e.g. 1880s) is detailed and exact:

Families of these Indians came annually to the plantations; the women and young members pick cotton through the winter; the men passed on across the Yazoo River to hunt. Starting in companies of three or more they usually met by previous arrangement, with others and thus the Yazoo Valley would have a number of Indian hunters camped about... These Indians knew where the high land was to be found, and where mounds would show themselves above the highest overflows. High waters were as important to these hunters as to raftsmen, because the game which they sought would be forced by the high water to occupy a smaller range and could be more certainly found.

One of the most popular places was around the location now called Rolling Fork. They called it Issaquena, meaning Issa, deer—Quena, heap or abundant. Above that they reported very high land, with old cane burns, on which the growth was poke and blackberries; this

the Indians called Yokna-Nitta. The first word, Yokna means land or ground, the other word, Nitta, meaning bear,—that is, land of bears, now called Nitta-Yuma.

The roving hunters would often continue their migrations north to the higher ground, which they called Oqua-Escho, in English, Oqua, water, Ecksho, no, not or none—that is never overflowed by water. Going northeast, they crossed a stream called then and now, Bogue, large bayou, Philiiah, long; thence ten or twelve miles to a lake called Nelton, and around this to a collection of mounds on Hush-puck-a-na lake, now called Sunflower River... Their camps, made of bark, were on the lake or around these mounds, these to be their resort in case of extreme high water.

Other hunting parties crossed the Yazoo River above Warren County, and made their place of meeting and camping on Lake Dawson and Mound Bayou... East of Mound Bayou, a favorite place of encampment was in a grove on the Sunflower River at and above a very high front now called Shell Ridge.... This beautiful grove has been destroyed to make cottonfields of Capt. Book-out and the Messrs. Andrews, of Vicksburg...⁶³

⁶³ Pearl McNeal, "Interesting History of the Laws and Customs of the Choctaw Indians" in Works Progress Administration RG 60, Number 126, File Folder "Folklore: Incidents of Choctaw Life," Unpublished manuscript in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History collections, Jackson, MS.

Other historical sources corroborate that all during the nineteenth century the Choctaw maintained these hunting patterns. Historian Watkins noted that early in the nineteenth century the Choctaw spent several winter weeks in the Mississippi Delta “either on the Yazoo and its tributaries” or in “the swamps of Louisiana.”⁶⁴ In Issaquena County “in the early history of the county the Indians would come... to fish and hunt.”⁶⁵ Holmes County was “a favorite hunting and fishing ground of the Indians before and for many years after they parted with the right of the domain. While they were living in other counties, they would hunt and fish in this county during certain periods of the year.”⁶⁶ In 1917 J.D. Pace, Mayor of Union, Mississippi, summarized the continuation of traditional, migratory expeditions by the central Mississippi Choctaw:

they have been a great race to go about over the county when there was any game and hunting. I have known them to go off and stay three or four months in a little wagon with a tent cloth over it over in the Delta, when there used to be plenty of game over in the Delta, and be gone from the first of December to the First of March or April. They would come back then and make a crop.⁶⁷

It is significant that one version concerning the coming of Pushmataha (perhaps the Choctaw’s greatest nineteenth century statesman) began “The Choctaw braves had gone to the woods of the Mississippi Delta for a big bear hunt and when the party camped for the first night...”⁶⁸

The ubiquitous Choctaw dependence on their natural environment is a key to understanding all aspects of tribal culture, including theology. According to Cushman, “the philosophy of the ancient Indian ever taught him to concentrate his mind upon the spirit land; and that the influences which surrounded him in Nature” (animate and inanimate) were sent by spirits.⁶⁹ The Christian influence of a single, omnipotent God, subsumed in native ideology, is apparent in this March 6, 1829, diary entry by a Presbyterian missionary:

Today Tahoka came in, and in the course of our conversation, stated, as it were incidentally, that when looking out for his horse, yesterday, he saw a deer lying down, and it came to his mind, how easily he could kill it if he had his gun, and perhaps my heavenly Father intends to present me with that animal for my use; if so, it will lie there till I can go home and return with my gun. I considered that it was one of my Father’s creatures, but that he has made it lawful to take the life of some animals for our food. And now if it be right to kill that deer, O my Father above, make me to know it, by causing it to lie there till I return with a gun; thinking that if it was not right for me to have it, I should know by its absence. I walked leisurely home, and back again a considerable distance, and found the deer in the same place; then, after lifting up my heart again to my Father above, I fired and killed it, and returned thanks to my great Benefactor for the present.⁷⁰

The melding of Christian and Choctaw ideology is also illustrated in this Peter Pitchlynn disclosure: “our people all believe that the spirit lives in a future state...” After death the spirit either crossed a stream to “delightful hunting grounds” with green trees, cloudless skys, cooling breezes, rejoicing and everlasting youth; or it fell into water “stinking with dead fish and animals,” and wandered in a barren land filled with hunger and sickness.⁷¹

Among ritual tribal last rites was the Choctaw practice of burying the dead with those items deemed necessary for the journey to and tenure in the spirit ground. This custom persisted throughout the nineteenth century.⁷² Historian Hodgson observed of the early nineteenth century (and earlier) that the Choctaw “generally killed favorite horses or dogs of the deceased and buried them with his gun and hatchet, in his grave.”⁷³ In an oral history from Attala County regarding a

⁶⁴ John A. Watkins, “The Choctaws in Mississippi.” *The American Antiquarian & Oriental Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (March 1894): 70.

⁶⁵ Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Issaquena County.”

⁶⁶ Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Holmes County.”

⁶⁷ Congress Committee, 160.

⁶⁸ Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Greene County.”

⁶⁹ Horatio Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1972).

⁷⁰ American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. “Notices of Choctaw Converts: Summary View of the Choctaw Mission.” Paper Number 14, 1830, 7-8.

⁷¹ Swanton, *Source Material*, 218.

⁷² Eugene Farr, Baptist minister and religious historian, officiated at two funerals on the Bogue Homo Reservation in 1940-1941. In both burials personal effects were interred with the body.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁴ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Attala County."

⁷⁵ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Newton County."

⁷⁶ Watkins, *Choctaws*, 77.

⁷⁷ Swanton, *Source Materials*, 139.

⁷⁸ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Newton County."

⁷⁹ White, *Roots*, 95.

⁸⁰ Swanton, *Source Materials*, 44.

⁸¹ Kendall Blanchard, *The Mississippi Choctaws at Play: The Serious Side of Leisure*, (Urbana, Chicago, London: Univ. of IL Press, 1981), 30.

⁸² Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Neshoba County."

⁸³ Sister John Christopher Langford, "Holy Rosary Indian Mission: The Mississippi Choctaw & the Catholic Church." In Wells, *After Removal*, 115.

⁸⁴ Watkins, *Choctaws*, 73-74.

⁸⁵ Swanton, *Source Materials*, 40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

mid-nineteenth century Choctaw boy's burial we are informed that his gun, coat, and dog were placed in the grave.⁷⁴ In Newton County, until the 1890s, the Choctaw placed "the deceased in a sitting position in the grave with a bowl of mush and their hunting equipment which included their gun and dog."⁷⁵ Watkins, speaking of Choctaw "converted" to Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century, skeptically ventured "but when they come to die I have no doubt but what they see in the future the spirit hunting ground and anticipate the pleasures of the chase..."⁷⁶

From the earliest French accounts we are told that Choctaw men "occupy themselves only with hunting."⁷⁷ That the Choctaw male's role and identity in the nineteenth century centered around hunting cannot be overstated. An unusually insightful census taker put "HUNTER" in the occupation column for Choctaw male heads of household in his 1870 Newton County return. From the same county came a report that, on a regular basis, when a Choctaw man owed a favor he repaid it with the gift of wild game in the 1890s.⁷⁸ Richard White noted that hunting excursions "preserved something of the social role and status of the warriors."⁷⁹

In the post-removal period Choctaw men donned animal tails, which symbolized their domination of the natural environment and so the warriors' strength and manhood. This practice, of course, was not without precedent. According to Swanton, a skillful hunter might wear a deer tail; a great fighter, a wild cat or tiger tail; and a fast runner (usually a ballplayer), a deer or horse tail.⁸⁰ Mid to late nineteenth century accounts, however, usually limit the wearing of tails to the ballfield. In 1841 painter George Catlin noted that a ballplayer wore only a breech-cloth, beaded belt and a "'tail' made of white horsehair or quills, and a 'mane,' on the neck of horsehair dyed various colors."⁸¹ This uniform was modified somewhat by the 1870s when "over this breech-cloth, hanging in the rear, is the tail of some animal, denoting the swiftness with which the warrior can run, sometimes a fox's tail, horse's tail..."⁸² By the end of the nineteenth century the practice of wearing tails had extended to church attendance. At the



Courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

15. "Drinks the Juice of the Stone, in Ball-Player's Dress," painting by George Catlin, 1834

Catholic Mission in Tucker, men came to church wearing "squirrel tails attached to their belts."⁸³ It would seem that the indexical relationship between tail and specific attributes of the animal had been replaced with a more iconographic function—e.g., the tail worn at any social or ceremonial occasion as a badge of manhood.

According to Swanton, Choctaw men built the houses. Men also did metalwork and molded clay for bowls and for their beloved pipes. Women, however, bore the primary responsibility for all other domestic chores. Women accompanied their men on nomadic treks. Of the early nineteenth century one man remembered, "I have often seen the women with a large hopper basket on the shoulders...containing all their worldly effects...and carrying her husband's gun while he walked in advance."⁸⁴ The Choctaw woman was more than a servant; she was an important economic factor. During the winter, swamp cane (material from which baskets are made) is pliable and so best then gathered and worked.⁸⁵ According to Simpson Tubby, in the Choctaw hunting camps "the older women cut and dried canes and made baskets every night..."⁸⁶ Traditionally made by women, baskets were the Choctaw trade mainstay. Across the state, oral history confirms that the Choctaw would exchange a basket for whatever it would hold. In Kemper County the smaller baskets were traded for coffee and sugar, the medium size for flour, and the larger



Courtesy of Bureau of Indian Affairs

16. Jeffrie D. Solomon, basketmaker from Conehatta community

for corn meal or a piece of meat.⁸⁷ Sometimes, a basket would bring double its fill. One historian described this arrangement: “paid in bacon, the price of a basket was the area on a ‘middling’ that the bottom of a basket would cover.”⁸⁸ In Montgomery County of the 1880s one writer declared, “to see a dozen squaws coming down the road with a mountain of baskets enveloping them, would revive the memory of the woods of Dunsanane on the march again.”⁸⁹

To summarize, the Choctaws feel a strong bond with their ancestral Mississippi homeland. Although 95 percent of the tribe left Mississippi under the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, in 1860 some 1,000 Choctaws remained in the state. Here they maintained traditional lifeways; the Choctaw maintained historic land, settlement, and housing patterns. As much as possible they remained independent of Mississippi land laws. The Choctaws continued their migratory hunting practices especially in the interior Mississippi Delta. Male and female roles, as well as ritual burial practices and theological constructs, were grounded in Choctaw relationships with their native environment. In the 1880s, when cotton planters opened the interior Delta, the tribes saw the very heart of their traditional culture cleared and cultivated.



Courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

17. Hickman Thomas, Choctaw silversmith, 1908

⁸⁷ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Kemper County.”

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, “Montgomery County.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ John Wade, "Lands of the Liquidating Levee Board," In *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, Vol. IX(1904): 309.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, John Wade's "Lands of the Liquidating Levee Board" contains a more detailed investigation of Delta levee boards and their taxation practices.

⁹² Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Hugh Isaac.

⁹³ Mississippi Department of Archives & History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, "Montgomery County."

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, "Jefferson County."

⁹⁵ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaws*, transcript from videotaped interview with Duke Denson.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, transcript from videotaped interview with Murphy Solomon.



18. Choctaw sharecropper family, 1937

The Choctaw of central Mississippi historically claimed hunting rights in the interior Delta. One historian attributed the fact that "the Delta country had practically no development"⁹⁰ to problematical, conflicting land claims.⁹¹ In the 1880s, clear titles in hand, cotton planters immediately began draining swamps and building levees. The coming of the railroad expedited the opening of the interior Delta. In the post-bellum period Mississippians uncovered one of the world's most fertile regions. To Choctaw eyes, however, it must have seemed a travesty. Today, Hugh Isaac warns "the trees held the moisture in the ground. But the white men cleared the surrounding land for cotton and the land wouldn't hold the moisture. It done dried out. God don't want it like that."⁹²

For the Mississippi Choctaw, perhaps nothing, save the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, affected life as did the closing of the interior Delta. A lifestyle that survived removal quickly underwent transformation. All evidence, from oral history and observations of public ceremonial events to the mute testimony of Choctaw material culture, points



Courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

19. Albert Henry, Choctaw ballplayer, 1908

to rapid changes in Choctaw lifeways during the period 1880s-1900. The loss of wild food resources meant more than a simple change in diet. The Choctaw migratory lifestyle soon evolved. In Montgomery County, since the 1880s, "none [Choctaw] have been seen in these settlements," wrote one county historian.⁹³ In the 1930s a Jefferson County historian remarked, "it has been fifteen years or more since they came to this country."⁹⁴

His hunting expertise no longer of primary importance, the Choctaw male saw his social role change drastically. He fed his family from wages earned as a day laborer or from crops raised as a sharecropper. Perhaps due to lack of time and resources, Choctaw men abandoned their metalwork. The male art of pottery, and later of pipe making, soon became obsolete. The current collective Mississippi Choctaw memory recalls no pottery operations, although Duke Denson speculates, "I have an idea how to do it."⁹⁵ Murphy Solomon remembers, "my grandpa would make the pipes."⁹⁶

Ballplay became even more important to



Courtesy of the Neshoba County Public Library

20. Choctaw woman with bead loom, date unknown

Choctaw manhood at the end of the nineteenth century. Historically, the ballgame functioned as much more than sport. According to anthropologist Kendall Blanchard's informants, "the real stickball match of the past was that of pitting two towns against each other. Ideally, such a contest was initiated as a deliberate effort to avoid a more dangerous conflict or encounter."⁹⁷ A.J. Brown intimated that the nineteenth century Choctaws "felt great pride and a consciousness of success of their own clan" at the ballgame. Brown, who grew up around the Choctaw, also noted that these games were played "for the profit that was in them" (from betting).⁹⁸ With his hunting role sharply diminished the Choctaw male's attention and emphasis turned to ballplay in the late nineteenth century. Simpson Tubby noted that "until 21 years ago" [e.g. 1896] the Choctaw thought little of farming "because this ball game that they had here was taking the time of the Choctaw tribe then, and we couldn't do anything with them...."⁹⁹

While the Choctaw male's role was forever altered with the closing of the Delta interior,

the woman's role changed little. She continued to work in the cotton fields, to cultivate small household plots, and to supplement the family income with basketry. Nattie Tubby remembers that her mother "would trade for food. She would load a wagon with baskets and go to Kosciusko."¹⁰⁰ We may attribute contemporary tribal identification with basketry, beadwork, and women's clothing to female role perseverance.

Women's dress represents a proud tribal heritage. Today, the traditional dress is a "slightly modified version of a white woman's one-piece dress of the late 18th or early 19th century" with a ruffled and applique-decorated apron.¹⁰¹ Kirby Willis remembers "my mother always wore Choctaw dress when she went out. At home she would wear anything to work in but she always wore Choctaw dress when she went out. I think that was because those were her best dresses."¹⁰² Thallis Lewis recalls that her parents "always wore Choctaw clothing, even in the fields. If they went out fishing, they wore their Choctaw dress. That was part of them."¹⁰³

Historically among the Choctaw, "widely divergent costume" styles were common.¹⁰⁴ In the early nineteenth century men especially incorporated many trappings of the white dress. Women's clothing, however, changed less noticeably. In the 1880s, in accordance with other social upheavals, women's dress changed for the last time. Aboriginal features — wearing blankets, leather leggings, moccasins (spoils of the hunt)—were obsolete by the turn of the century.¹⁰⁵

From curious white spectators comes another indication that Choctaw culture underwent transformation in the period 1880s-1900. Americans had long been fascinated with the complex Choctaw death rites. Witness only to the public ceremonies—last cries, poll pullings and burial customs—whites consistently refer to changes around the turn of the century. H.S. Halbert related that "down to about 1883" last cries and poll pullings were prevalent "in nearly all the Choctaw communities."¹⁰⁶ One WPA Newton County historian interviewed a Conehatta

⁹⁷ Blanchard, *Choctaws at Play*, 29.

⁹⁸ A.J. Brown, *History of Newton County Mississippi: From 1834-1894*, (Jackson, MS: *Clarion-Ledger Company*, 1894), 15.

⁹⁹ Congress Committee, 129.

¹⁰⁰ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Nattie Tubby.

¹⁰¹ James Howard & Marshall Gettys, "The Harkins Choctaw Dolls as a Source of Choctaw Cultural History." In *Bulletin of the Oklahoma Anthropological Society*, Vol. 32(1983): 19.

¹⁰² Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Kirby Willis.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, transcript from videotaped interview with Thallis Lewis.

¹⁰⁴ Howard and Gettys, *Harkins Dolls*, 2.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Swanton, *Source Materials*, 194.



Photograph by Carole Thompson

21. Mrs. Robinson displays her handwork, 1981

Choctaw and concluded that “the exact date of the first burial of the Choctaw in the manner of whites is not known but the oldest date on a small monument in the Conehatta cemetery dates back to 1891... The best possible sources of information place the establishment of the church in 1886. The Choctaws are very poor and no elaborate caskets are bought.”¹⁰⁷ H.S. Halbert attributed the decline of “heathen ceremonies” to the introduction of Christianity and education. The closing of the interior Delta, however, necessitated the Choctaw abandonment of native theological beliefs (as indicated by the change in death rites). An afterworld once envisioned as a hunting ground was no longer pertinent. The abandonment of ritual death rites mirrored theological changes.

In conclusion, from the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek to the closing of the interior Delta, the Choctaw persistently maintained settlement and land use patterns, housing, theology and sex roles. In the period 1880s-1900, however, Choctaw migratory lifeways ended. The male role changed dramatically; men stopped silverwork and pottery. They became part of Mississippi’s farm labor system. For their part, women continued working in the cotton fields and making baskets. Their domestic chores, from gardening to making clothing and beadwork, continued as well. Choctaw social and ceremonial life, however, changed with male roles.

¹⁰⁷ Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Works Progress Administration, Record Group 60, “Newton County.”

¹⁰⁸ Weills, *Mississippi Choctaw*, transcript from videotaped interview with Maxine Dixon.

Ballplay assumed primary importance to the tribe as a test of Choctaw manhood. Choctaw religion, from historic times based on a concept of the spirit world as hunting ground, changed when the Choctaw lost their historic hunting areas.

In identifying this Choctaw cultural watershed, I did not intend to suggest that the Choctaws relinquished all control of their native environment. Today, tribal rainmakers bring relief from drought; and medicine men/women practice their timeless herbal cures (indeed tribal healers have been used as consultants by the reservation health center). Moreover, the tribe continues to regulate contact with their non-Choctaw neighbors. The preservation of the Choctaw language is widely applauded; miscegenation is frowned upon. Maxine Dixon perhaps speaks for all Choctaws when she says “there’s this old saying... when the time comes for the world to end, or to begin anew... unless we kept [traditions] we will be lost with the rest... it’s an old, old story.”¹⁰⁸



Photograph by Carole Thompson

22. Pete Dyer, Rainmaker, 1981

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Courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

23. Choctaws performing "Snake Dance," 1909

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24. Choctaw family, c. 1938

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12. Donie Willis's government house, c. 1970s, from *Nanah Waiya*, 1978.
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24. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
25. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
26. Carole Thompson

Catalog of Exhibit

REMOVAL OF THE CHOCTAW

a) Pipe smoked at the
signing of the Treaty
of Dancing Rabbit
Creek, 1830

Accession 6125.1739
The Thomas Gilcrease
Institute of American
History and Art
Tulsa, Oklahoma

b) Ceremonial sword
and Peace Medal which
belonged to Choctaw
district chief
Greenwood LeFlore,
date unknown
Estate of Mrs. Carolyn
Hinton
Greenwood, Mississippi

c) Peace Medal
(obverse, reverse)
which belonged to
Choctaw district chief
Greenwood LeFlore,
date unknown
Estate of Mrs. Carolyn
Hinton
Greenwood, Mississippi



a



b



c





a



b



c

POTTERY AND METALWORK

a) *Tan-Fula* (hominy) bowl, c. 1830

Accession 2164
The Oklahoma Historical Society, State Museum
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

b) Earthenware bowl, c. 1838

Accession 005449
The National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

c) Burnt clay pipe bowl, c. 1917

Accession 300892
The National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

(not pictured)

d) Burnt clay pipe bowl, c. 1917

Accession 300893
The National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

e) Stone pottery smoother, date unknown
Accession 1/9101
The Museum of the American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

(not pictured)

f) Incised pottery sherds, pre-1832
Lowndes County,
Hotana site
Collection of Rufus Ward
West Point, Mississippi

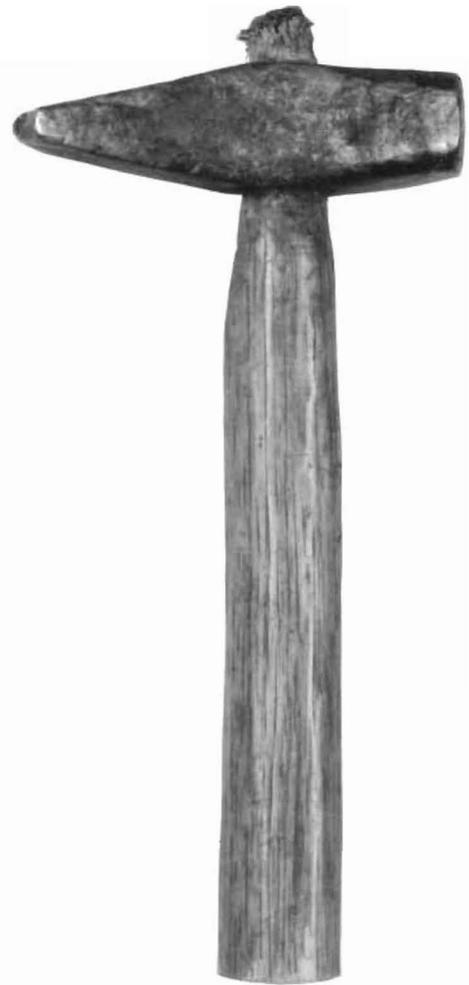
g) Hammer for silver work, date unknown
Accession 1/8822
The Museum of the American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

h) Horn earring mold, date unknown
Accession 1/8837
The Museum of the American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

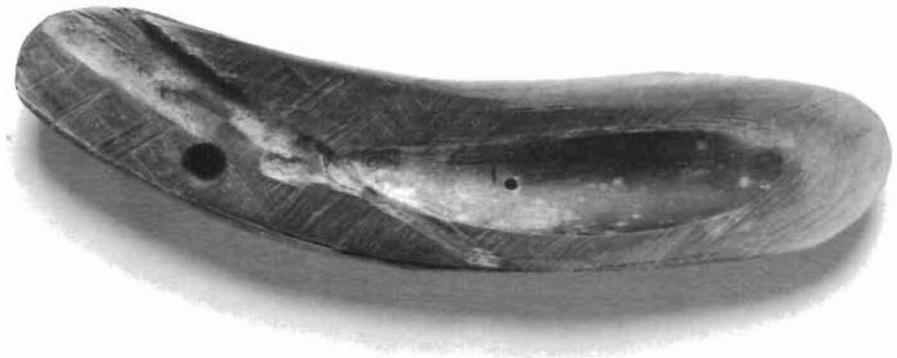
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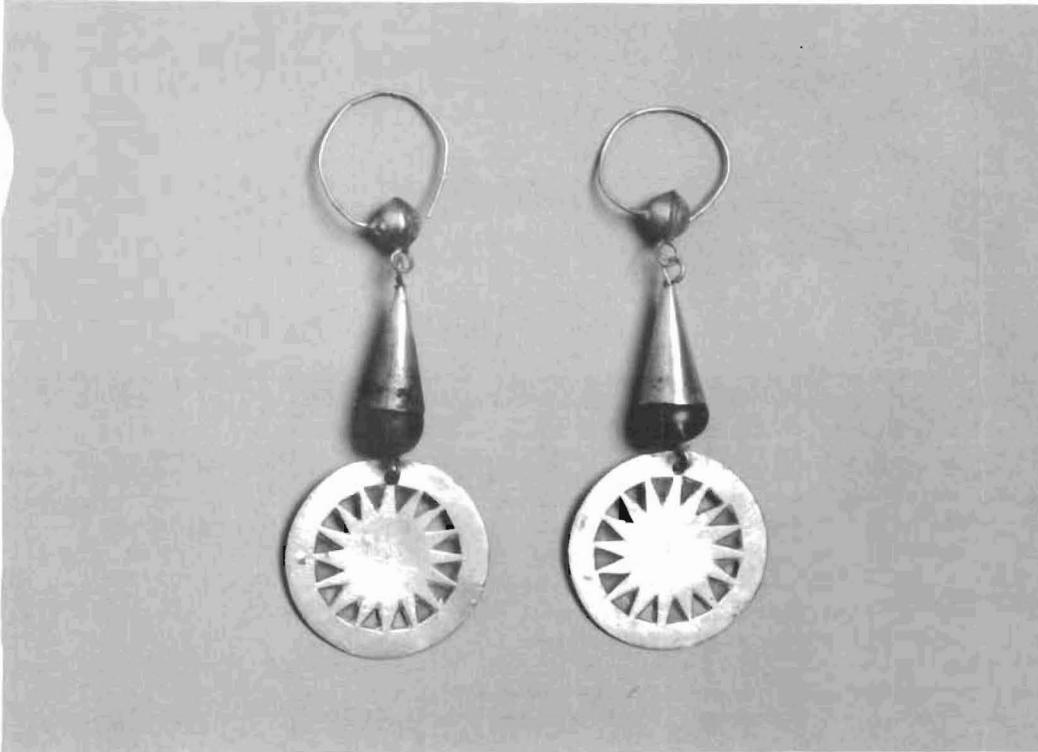


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h

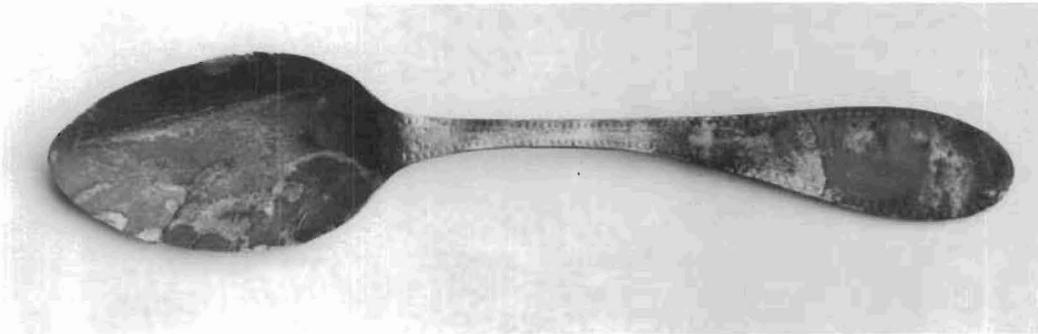




i) **Silver earrings,**
date unknown
Accession 1/9090
The Museum of the
American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

j) **Silver spoon,**
c. 1810-1832
Lowndes County,
Hotana site
Collection of Rufus Ward
West Point, Mississippi

(not pictured)
k) **Incised brass,**
c. 1810-1832
Lowndes County,
Yokatubbee site
Collection of Rufus Ward
West Point, Mississippi



MIGRATORY
HUNTING

a) Choctaw male doll
in costume of early-
mid 19th century
Accession 2692
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma

b) Alligator tooth
powder measure,
date unknown
Accession 2112
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma

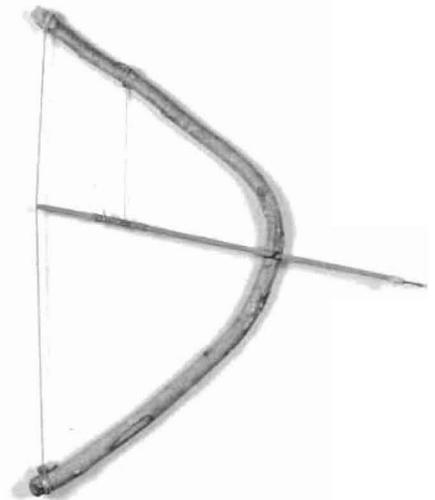
c) Bow and arrow for
fishing, date unknown
Accession 1/8851
The Museum of the
American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York



a



b



c



d



e

d) Hunting bag owned by Greenwood LeFlore, date unknown
Collection of Joy and Christopher Bryan
Carrollton, Mississippi

e) Hunting bag and powder horn, date unknown
Accession 1/8885
The Museum of the American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

f) Blowgun and dart, c. 1918
Accession 304038
The National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.



f

STICKBALL GAME

a) Breech cloth with
ballplay tail,
date unknown
Accession 1/8882
The Museum of the
American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

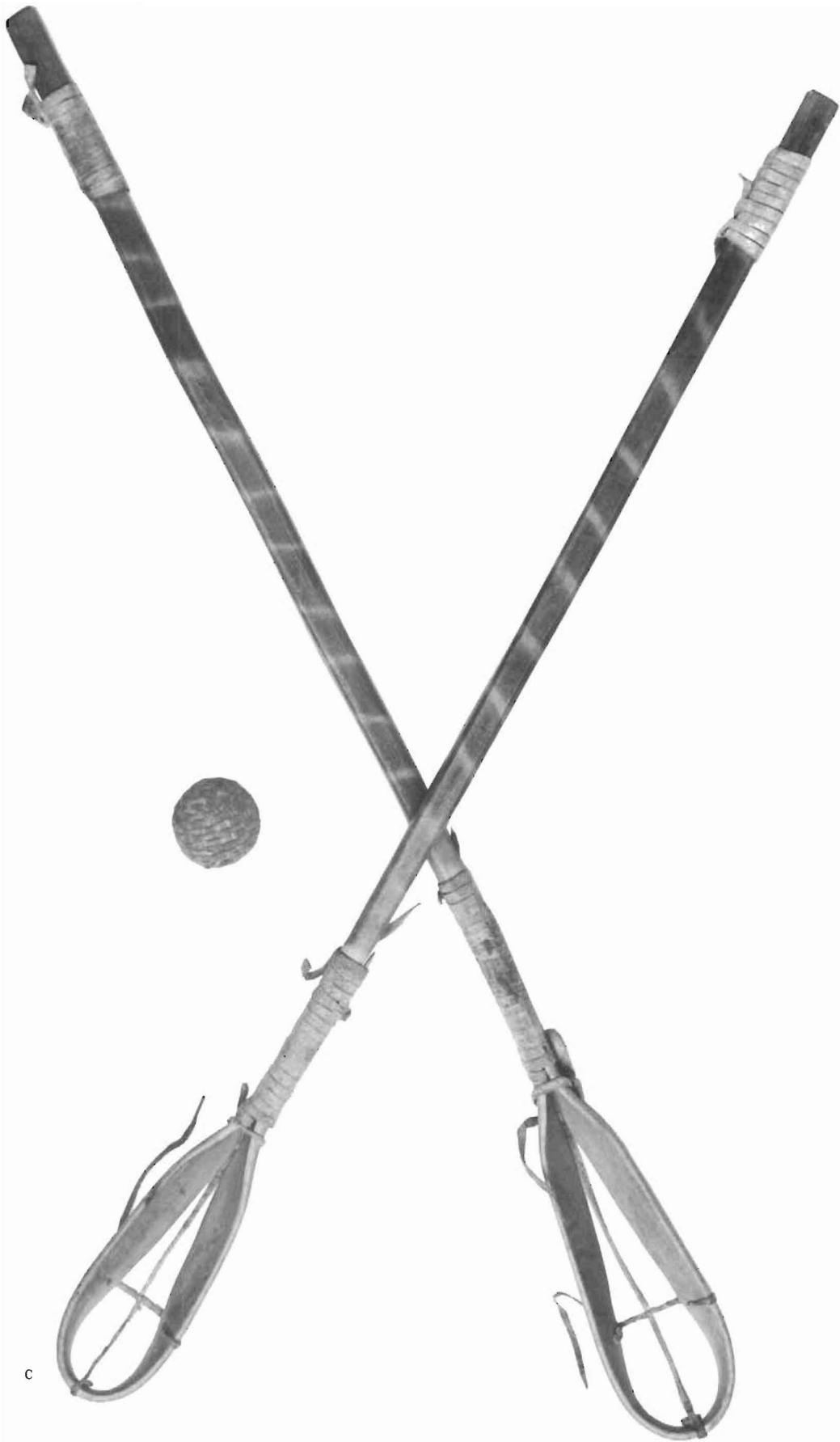
b) Horsehair ballplay
tail, date unknown
Accession 1/8876
The Museum of the
American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York



a



b



c) Pair of ballsticks and
leather ball, c. 1939
Accession 380089;
380088
The National Museum
of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

c

WOMEN'S
CLOTHING

a) Woman's blouse,
c. 1860

Accession 024140
The National Museum
of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.



a

b) Choctaw female doll
in costume of the
1850s-1880s period

Accession 2690
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma



b



c



d



e

d) Choctaw female doll
in costume of the
1850s-1880s period
Accession 2694
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma

e) Choctaw female doll
in clothing of
1880s period
Accession 2693
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma

f) **Woman's dress and apron, c. 1939**
Accessions 380093-4
The National Museum
of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

g) **Female doll, c. 1950s**
Accession NAM-11-9
The Stovall Museum of
Science and History
University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma



f



g



h

h) Woman's dress,
c. 1950s
Accession 82.64.1
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi

i) Female doll, c. 1933
Accession 3996
The Oklahoma
Historical Society,
State Museum
Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma



i

SWAMP CANE
BASKETRY

a) **Double weave**
basket, c. 1835
Accession 7126.519
The Thomas Gilcrease
Institute of American
History and Art
Tulsa, Oklahoma

(not pictured)

b) **Single weave**
basket, c. 1849
Accession 292453
The National Museum
of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

c) **Double weave**
basket, c. 1900-1940s
Collection of Mr. and
Mrs. Norman Johnson, Jr.
Philadelphia, Mississippi

d) **Double weave**
basket, c. 1980
Accession 86.10.4
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi



a



d



c



a



b



c



d

BEADED SASHES

a) Beaded sash,
date unknown
Accession 1/8869
The Museum of the
American Indian
Heye Foundation
New York, New York

b) Beaded sash,
c. 1880s-1900s
Accession 87.8.1
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi

c) Beaded sash,
c. 1975-1984
Accession 86.11.2
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi

d) Beaded sash, c. 1810
Accession 73527A
The National Museum
of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

DANCE AND
CHANTING

a) Tortoise shell
rattle, date unknown

Accession 24/1526

Stiles Collection

The Museum of the

American Indian

Heye Foundation

New York, New York



a



b



c

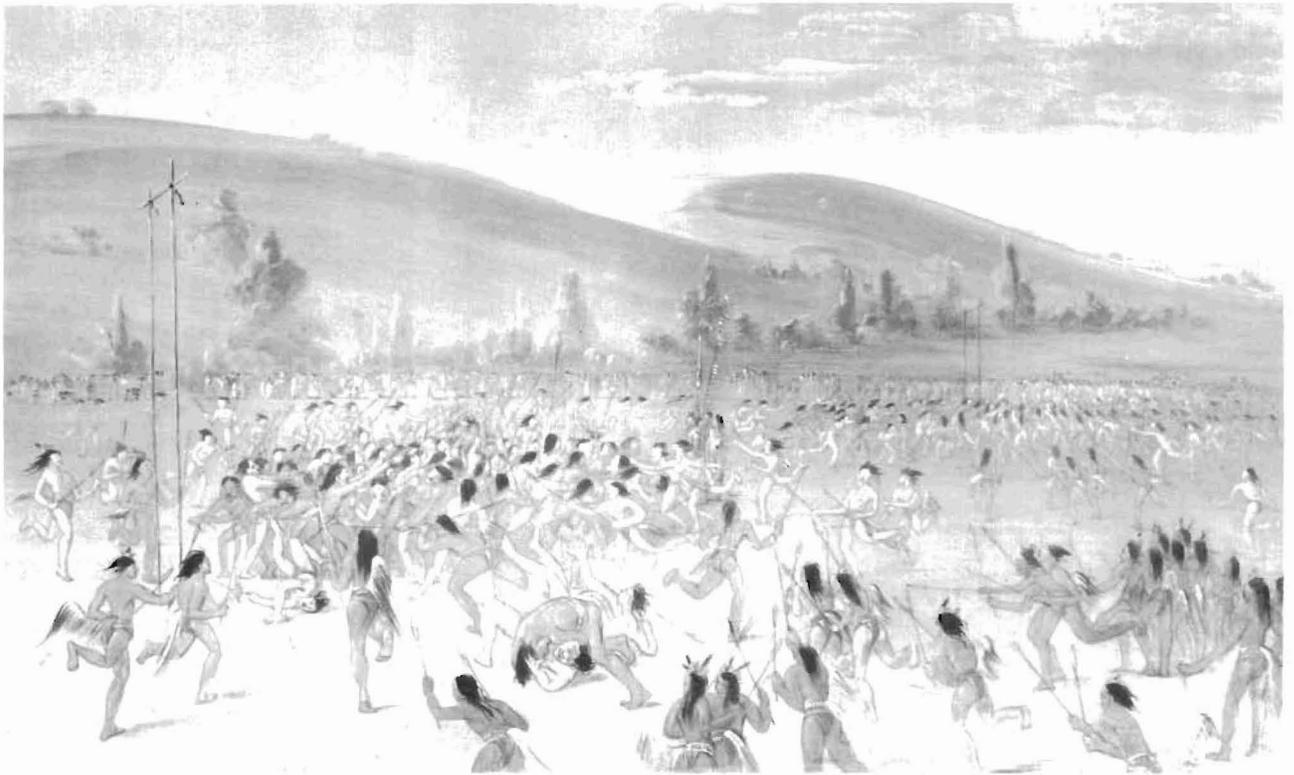
b) Drum and sticks,
c. 1930s
Accession 87.10.1a,b,c
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi

c) Drum and sticks,
c. 1976
Accession 84.56.1a,b,c
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi

LANGUAGE
a) *English and Choctaw
Dictionary for the Choctaw
Academies and
Schools, 1852.*
First Choctaw dictionary,
by Cyrus Byington.
Mississippi State
Historical Museum
Jackson, Mississippi



a



Courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

25. "Ball Play of the Choctaw—Ball Up," painting by George Catlin, c. 1840



Photograph by Carole Thompson

26. Choctaw Stickball, 1981