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CHEROKEE NATION MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Bushyhead, Dennis Wolfe (1826-1898)

Papers 1879-1922

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Indian chief. Correspondence (1879-1897); annual messages (1879-1882); speeches (1879-1887); an autobiography (1880); proclamations (1879-1885); and other papers (1879-1922) relating to political matters in which Bushyhead was involved as principal chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1879-1887, and a representative to the Dawes Commission, and to the controversies growing out of the Cherokee Strip Livestock Association's operations.

For the Cherokee people the period during which Dennis Wolfe Bushyhead served as their Principal Chief was indeed ominous. The population of non-Indian intruders on Indian soil had burgeoned in the 1880's and their demands for land were unceasing. Poised on the borders of the Cherokee Outlet stood the "Boomers," who were eagerly awaiting the day when Cherokee lands would be opened. In the United States Congress a new movement to divide up the reservation among its people was gaining wide support. Not since the removal period did Cherokees face greater demands for them to relinquish title to their lands.

Bushyhead was born in Tennessee on March 18, 1826. His father, the Rev. Jesse Bushyhead, was one of the earliest Baptist missionaries among the Cherokee people. His mother, Eliza Wilkinson, was a Cherokee woman from Georgia. Bushyhead attended mission schools in Tennessee and North Carolina. In 1838 he and his family followed the "nuna-dat-sunyi" -- trail where they cried -- to the Indian Territory.

Bushyhead's education, although broken, was thoroughly imbued with Protestant ideals. He finished his secondary schooling under missionaries at Park Hill, near Tahlequah. In 1840 he was sent to college in New Jersey.

After completing his education in 1844, Bushyhead returned to the Cherokee Nation and established a mercantile business. A short time later he began to dabble in politics. In 1848 he was elected clerk of the Cherokee National Committee. His political ambitions were cut short the very next year, for the lust for California gold had overcome his ardent Cherokee nationalism.

He spent the next 18 years in California, returning to the Cherokee Nation in 1868. Bushyhead renewed both his mercantile business and his political aspirations. In 1871 he was elected treasurer of the Cherokee Nation. He held that position for eight years. Bushyhead was elected Principal Chief in the fall of 1879.

For the next eight years Bushyhead served as Chief. He was accredited with freeing the Nation from debt and bringing its currency to par with that of the United States. His eloquence before Congress and his writing abilities were said to have been a great factor in the exemption of the Five Civilized Tribes from the General Allotment Act of 1887.

After his two terms were completed Bushyhead continued to serve the Nation. He served as one of the three commissioners who negotiated the sale of the Cherokee Strip. Later he served as the chairman of the commission that carried on negotiations with the Dawes Commission. His committee was abolished in late 1897. On February 4 of the next year he died. He was among the best known of the Cherokee Chiefs and, at the time of his death, one of the Nation's most respected elder statesmen.