T-431

May 14, 1969

Index side A, recording time 7 minutes, interview time 40 minutes.

Informant: Tohnee Turtle, 50-year-old full blood Cherokee, Chewey Community, Adair County, Oklahoma

A few miles north of the present Chewey store and schoolhouse, several Cherokee families live around the old Crittenden meeting house. It is in this neighborhood that Tohnee Turtle was born and has spent all of his life here. He is handicapped with a crippled leg, but keeps his little home and yard clean and orderly. He lives on this hillside in the house built by his father, andhere too lives his mother.

He talks about his early schooling. It was very hard for him to attend school because of his lameness, but he did spend several years at Sequoyah Training School where he obtained much of his education. In his boyhood the only schools available to the Indians of his area was the school at Chewey, and the Holland School north of his home.

The Illinois River Baptist Church is fairly new to his home community and is the center of worship and community activities among the Cherokee here. The Indians have always been one to have meetings and in older days they would meet at some of the homes or at meeting grounds. The meeting grounds would be some place in these hills near good water and a clearing for a camp site. One of the last remaining meeting grounds in use is the one a few miles east of Chewey, where regular stomp dances, and other assemblies are held.

In the olden days most Indian burial places were not named or identified, and few graves were ever marked. For this part of the Chewey country the Cherokees use the Chewey and the Crittenden Cemeteries. Still in use and maintained is the Crittenden Cemetery which was started by Nelson Crittenden, one of the old Cherokees of the community.

During his time the Indian families of his acquaintence were the Birds, Cheweys, Crittendens, Wolfe, Downing, and Foremans. Many of the Indians he has known have moved away or have died. Mr. Turtle has always lived close to his home and has traveled very little. He is happy and content with the quietness and solitude that surrounds his little unpainted rough board home, and spends much time reading and working with his hands.

This hillside of Mr. Turtle's home overlooks the Illinois River and its fertile valley. There are beautiful farms and ranches in this Illinois River valley, but a pitiful few of its acres are owned by Indians. The series of events that separated the Cherokees from their lands is reflected in the tone of resentment as he talks about it. Except up in the rough and rocky hollows do the Indians farm any more, and then only small patches of corn, potatoes and vegetables. The good timber that once graced the hills is gone now, and the Indians no long hack ties or cut sawlogs.