

HARJO, WILLIE

INTERVIEW

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## MIGRATIONS AND INCIDENTS

An interview of Willie Harjo, Wewogufkee  
Town (tulwa), age 67, Hanna, Oklahoma.

Billie Byrd, Interviewer  
Indian-Pioneer History  
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C-chee Harjo, who was my father, told the story of a swamp which had to be traveled through before the Indians that were coming to the Indian Territory reached the Mississippi river. He said he and his father were along during the sorrowful journey and he told of the pitiful sights that they saw on their journey.

He said it was not only he and his father that had to wade through the swamp but also men, women, boys, girls, old or young. He said it wasn't anything like crossing a small sized swamp for it took them six days before they ever set a step on dry land.

Knolls, higher levels of ground or small hills were sought out for sleeping places for there the places were a little drier than the swampy bottom lands. My father even told of the time that he once had the luck to find a bone which was the large shoulder blade of some large animal and this he used for a rest for his head.

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It was not only a journey through swamp but there were deaths and there were burials. It was at that time as my father said that my grandfather gave out from old age and exposure and fell on the way. His grave was a small brooklet which was chosen because it was rather deep and narrow. My grandfather's body was placed in this and the dirt picked with axes from along the banks were then heaped over the body.

O-chee Harjo and his father were Creeks and numbered among those that favored the move to the Indian Territory. My father served as a Confederate during the civil war.

The old Indian people lived not knowing the white man's custom or wanting to learn them but they were always speaking of the old days and saying, "It used to not be way but everything is changing." Although the tribal town spokesman had influence and power through speech over his tribal town members yet there came a time when the influence and power was becoming weaker and weaker and the old Indian customs and ideas which had been strongly enforced were gradually disappearing.

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I remember Hotulke Emarthla who owned a long peace pipe and was always smoking it. He was the leader of the Ochai town (tulwa). I knew Ispahecha who was a man of short stature and had whiskers few in number. He spoke to his people by cautioning the Muskogee-Creeks to watch themselves and stand up for the old treaty which had been signed in Alabama. Then his own tribesmen made the unlearned Ispahecha their leader and chief (he neither spoke or wrote the English language but he had wisdom). It was then that Ispahecha without knowing it finished negotiations with government people giving his consent for the Dawes commission to begin work of enrolling the Indians for allotments of land.

It was at this time, too, that Chitto Harjo, who was my uncle and in whose yard I grew up, took his stand against the move. He was unsuccessful in his move and was forced to accept allotment later on.

The word Seminole is a Muskogee-Creek word which was used by the older people in the old country. Seminole was always used when referring to the wild things of everyday life. Apples are called in the

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native tongue, "sa-ta" and the persimmon is known as "sa-ta Seminol-e" meaning wild apples. The present day Muskogee-Creeks do not use Seminole when in reference to wild but use mostly the word "ho-he-cha". In reality the Seminole tribe was a part of the Creek tribe but the so-called Seminoles had run away to Florida when the Muskogee-Creeks were being forced to move westward and had become wild and unruly and made their homes in the Everglades of Florida.

Strange as it may seem, there are a few tribal town members of the Alabama town (tulwa), especially of the older ones, who speak the Alabama dialect and still are members of the Muskogee-Creek nation, and in the Seminole nation there is a group that used another dialect and these were the Mekusukey town members.

The older Indians have noticed that the streams both large and small of the Indian Territory or all the streams west of the Mississippi river all flow in an easterly and southern direction while all the streams east of the Mississippi river flow in a westerly and southern direction. The streams that flowed towards

the east and emptied into the Mississippi river were called by the Indians as "Od-a" (Comer), and the streams that flowed towards the west and emptied into the Mississippi river were called, "A-the-ba" (Just Going).

I can remember the Muskogee-Creek Indian men and how they appeared during the time from 1870 to 1890 during their everyday life. Sometimes they were fearful looking in trying to take up the white custom of dress. Their hair was long and shaggy and instead of using a comb they would just wet their hair and run their hands through it and throw it back over their heads. They wore the large brimmed hats with the uncreased crown and a large handkerchief tied around their necks, sometimes the men even wore ear rings through their pierced ears. Boots were worn which had long eared flaps by which means the boots were pulled onto the feet.

They had plenty of gold coins for which they had no use and much of this gold as it is told was often carefully wrapped and placed in small iron

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pots or copper pots and buried. More often these exact spots where the gold was buried was often forgotten by the old Indians. That is why so many people believe in buried treasure and it has been told by those actually experiencing it that it is very difficult to unearth the buried treasures.

Some of the men, to set off some special occasion, often wore a shell like ornament called the "Ok-fa". This had a ribbon or string run through it and was to be tied around the neck and worn as a locket is worn. Many of these articles have been lost and there are very few that are in existence at the present.

(Note : Billie Byrd's interviews are typically Indian and no change is made in his diction. Ed).