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Investigator  
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Interview with Walter Gray,  
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

The Creeks and Seminoles had many peculiar superstitions, some of them very unreasonable to the mind of a white man. I spent most of my boyhood among them, around Okmulgee, Paden, Okemah, and Wewoka and I got my information first hand.

The Creeks and Seminoles had ceremonies for every major event in their lives; a ceremony for births, another for marriages, one for deaths, and special ceremonies before they set out upon any undertaking. They held a Stamp Dance before they met to play their ball games, for instance. And they had dances and ceremonies when their corn began to be edible in the summertime. They seemed to think that their ceremonies made it all right for them to go ahead with anything, brought them luck and appeased the spirits. The Indians believed in dreams, and thought they were signs and omens from spirits and they were very susceptible to the phenomena of Nature; they were very

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much afraid of thunder and lightning, and they saw omens in flying birds and running animals.

When I lived near Wewoka I knew a Seminole of the name of Benny Walker. That was in 1900. He lived two and one-half miles south and west of town. One of his daughters died and he buried her in his yard and Benny Walker and his wife came to the grave at night and built a fire at the west end of the grave, the head, so that the spirit of the little girl would have light to reach heaven. They came and built a fire for three nights straight.

I have heard that Indians considered it a serious insult for anyone to spit into an open grave that they were digging for one of their kin. I went to the Creek Nation in 1889; a Cherokee Indian killed a white man just before I got there for spitting into a grave that was being dug for the Indian's dead cousin. I heard the story from the Indian's brother. The one who did the killing was gone at the time, maybe hiding out, but I knew his brother well. The brother's name was George

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Brimer, and he lived on the north side of the North Canadian River, north of Rock Crossing, on the road from Okmulgee to Wewoka. He lived on a hill about one-fourth of a mile from the crossing and the graveyard in question was there by his house.

The way it happened, this white man - I never learned his name - was helping the Indians dig the grave. Carelessly, not knowing that the Indians considered it a deadly insult, he spit into the open grave. And one of the Indians killed him over it.

The Creeks and Seminoles were superstitious about rattlesnakes. In 1907 I knew a white man who lived just south and west of Wewoka near a school called "The Red Schoolhouse." This man's name was Martin and he had a lot of Seminoles for neighbors. The family right next door were Indians and Martin told me a story about them one day in town that throws a lot of light on Indian beliefs.

He said that at one time a big rattlesnake all of six feet long lived under the porch of his neighbor's

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house and the Seminoles let it stay there without bothering it; they thought it brought them good luck. The snake would crawl all over the place looking for food and then crawl back under the porch. The Indians had to watch for it all the time to keep from stepping on it and getting bitten, but they didn't seem to mind. But Martin did mind; he found the snake on his place one day and killed it. He was afraid to tell his Indian neighbors about it, so he hid the snake's body and kept quiet. And the Indians looked for their pet for days, afraid that if the snake didn't show up something bad would happen to them.

When the Seminoles learned definitely that Oklahoma was to become a state they held a council at a place about a mile west of Wewoka. They wanted the United States Government to let them go to Mexico. A lot of their chiefs and leaders were sitting under a brush arbor. They had talked and argued but had not arrived at any definite conclusion. They wanted to go, but they feared the Government wouldn't allow it.

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An Indian who was there told me about it, and he said they were just sitting quietly, not saying a word, when a big rattlesnake came crawling from the north and crawled under the northeast corner of the arbor. The Indians jumped up, laughing and shouting, for they thought that was an omen that their wishes would be granted and they would be allowed to go to Mexico.

In 1892 I lived in a little Indian community southwest of Okmulgee. The place was called "Gobbaslocko" or "Overcoat Town." That was Creek country. I had an Indian neighbor named Joe Fixico, a boy about fifteen. I was a year or two older than he, and we were pretty good pals; he would teach me Indian words and I would teach him English. We lived by the North Canadian River; I lived on the north bank, and Joe across on the south bank.

Joe explained a lot of their Indian customs to me. For instance, they made medicines out of herbs. But the medicinal properties of the herbs was only part of the treatment; the ceremonies they went through when mixing the medicine was supposed to make a big difference. The Creeks had "Medicine Men" who took care of mixing their

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medicines and these Medicine Men would blow into the medicines with a pipe, or tube, thinking that by doing so they drove away bad spirits.

Here is a story that is interesting and you may find it amusing, too. In 1892 there was an old Creek living over north of the place where Okemah is now and there was a negro living near there named Gordon. The Indian had been having a lot of sickness in his family and he was worried, thinking that there was a curse or something on him. Gordon was a negro preacher from Arkansas, but he had been in the Territory long enough to learn how an Indian's mind worked. Gordon, as you will see, was a crooked scoundrel, but it was sort of funny the way he worked the poor Indian.

Gordon heard about the sickness at the Indian's house. He rode up one day and said, "I'll tell you what to do to stop all this sickness you're having if you will give me a horse and saddle. I am a man that talks with spirits, and I feel that there is an evil spirit around here that is causing all the trouble. The spirit may be in the form of a dog, a chicken, a bird,

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or anything; if you find what it is and kill it your sickness will stop." This sort of talk would sound like the thinnest of nonsense to you or me, but the Indian believed every word of it; he had been taught such things from childhood. Still, he hesitated to part with a horse and saddle on such short notice, so he hemmed and hawed and finally refused outright.

Gordon wasn't whipped yet. "All right," he said gloomily, "I guess you are all going to die. I'd like to help you, but it's up to you."

In a week another of the Indian's children got sick and Gordon went back. The Indian had bundled his family, sick and all, into a wagon and had taken them to visit some of his kin folks, maybe to see a medicine man. Gordon caught a toad frog and put it under a big flat rock that the Indian was using as a door-step. He dug out a little hollow place in the earth under the rock, and put the frog under there in such a way that it could not escape. Then he rode off.

When the Indian got home Gordon went back again. This time the Indian told him if he would remove the

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curse he could have a horse and saddle. Gordon cut a stick about six feet long from a green hickory tree; using this as a staff, he went pecking around the place pretending to hunt for the "curse". He would sit for minutes at a time as though he were thinking; then he would search some more. After a while he struck the stone door-step with his staff, and said, "It is here!" The Indians took up the stone, and there sat the poor toad. They killed him. They thought that the curse had been lifted, that the evil spirit was gone. Gordon threw down his staff, mounted his new horse and rode away.