

NOAH, SARAH

INTERVIEW

#12367

263

NOAH, SARAH.

INTERVIEW.

12367

Lete W. Cole, Investigator
December 10, 1937

An interview with Sarah Noah, a
Choctaw Indian woman. Age 40 years.
Atoka, Oklahoma.

Bone Pickers

I am a native of Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, and know a little of the traditions of the Choctaw race of people in their olden days and again I have witnessed some of their entertainments that they enjoyed after their removal to this country.

The subject we are now dwelling on is what my father and elder people used to tell us at times. The Choctaw Indians are great story tellers. Now and then especially in the winter when all of the work about the house is finished, kitchen work, dining room, getting up wood and milking is finished, a big firewood is heaped up in the fire-place, all members of the family be seated around the fire when someone of the elder man or woman would begin to talk on some subject of the olden days. My father was a part French, Chickasaw and Choctaw and lived to be about sixty-seven years of age when he died. He used to tell about the dead corpse bone pickers, "Illi nipe-foni-fulli," about which he was told in his young days.

NOAH, SARAH.

INTERVIEW.

12367

2

In disposing of the dead, the ancient Choctaws had a peculiar way and practiced a strange method very different from any other tribe perhaps ever known or existed. When one died the body would be wrapped in a bearskin or some rough kind of covering and would be laid out on a scaffold which was erected for this purpose near the house of the deceased, being protected from wild beasts and dogs. On the top of this scaffold was laid the body on its side; a blanket or a skin of some wild animal was thrown over it.

Here the body remained in this position sufficient time for the flesh to be decomposed, entirely or nearly decayed when the Illi foni-nipi-fullih or Dead corpse bone picker, who was the principal officer in the ceremonies especially appointed for that duty, came to do his task. Relatives and friends marched to the scaffold and the official bone picker began picking off the flesh which still adhered to the bones while loud groans came from the friends and relatives as though they hurt or could feel the pain, and fearful grimaces responded by cries and wailings of these friends and relatives. Before all of this took place, the Bone Picker never trims the nail of his thumbs, index and middle fingers but lets it grow to any

NOAH, SARAH.

INTERVIEW.

12367

3

length before this last sacred rite is held.

When all the flesh was picked from the bones he tied it up in a bundle and placed it on the scaffold and gathered up the bones and placed them in a box and applied fire to the box and its contents while the mourners went frantic in crying and mournings until the box was consumed. The crowd then followed the bone picker while he carried the box containing the bones and placed it in a house constructed for this purpose, called Aboha-Foni-Syasha (Bone House). Then came the prepared feast and the sympathy of the dead by the members of the family was forgotten, while the Bone Picker, in virtue to his office, presided with much gravity and silent dignity.

Twice a year, in the Spring and Fall the people gathered at this place and had the ceremony over the bones of the dead. Two families would meet. One day one family would cry; and on the next day the other would cry.

When the bone house was filled, a general burial of the bones took place. For the funeral ceremony people came from far and near in a long line, weeping and wailing and with loud lamentation of the women. The boxes of bones were carried away to their last resting place and deposited in a form of a

NOAH, SARAH.

INTERVIEW.

12367

4

pyramid. They were covered with dirt about three feet deep in a conical mound. At this last burying, memorial tokens of various articles such as bows and arrows, tomahawks, ornaments and earthen pots were placed inside. When ashes and charred coals were covered over the tokens, over all was erected a mound. When this was completed the procession returned to the village and concluded the day in feasting.

This same cemetery or mound was used as a place of deposit for the bones of the dead for a long series of years until it became in size and height inconvenient and then another spot was chosen upon which the same manner was followed. By digging into these mounds wherever found, after passing through several years, about two feet in thickness a bed of ashes and charcoal is first met; then a bed of human bones together with fragments of pottery, arrow heads and Indian ornaments; then follows another stratum of ashes and charcoal; then human bones, pottery, ornaments and arrow-heads, on to the bottom. It is a conceded fact that in nearly every mound that has been excavated there have been found these human bones and more or less various articles such as pottery, vessels, implements of stone and copper, bows and arrows, figures of various birds and

NOAH, SARAH.

INTERVIEW.

12367

reptiles, shells and teeth of carnivorous animals and such like.

This was in practice when the white missionaries came among them and lived amongst them and reached to them, which dates back as far as 1818.

Note: Pete Cole's manuscripts are reproduced as he writes them so that none of his typical Indian expression of ideas and facts may be lost. Ed.