

ROSS, S. . . .

CHEROKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

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INTERVIEW.

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Elizabeth Ross,  
Investigator,  
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An Interview With S. W. Ross,  
Park Hill, Oklahoma.

CHEROKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Public schools established and maintained at the expense of the Cherokee Nation were situated at various points in the nine districts of the Nation. In the beginning there were eleven schools established, but there was a gradual increase during following years. One of the first schools was placed in operation at Tahlequah in 1841. The first teachers were both white and Cherokee, but when a sufficient number of Cherokee citizens were available they were given preference as teachers, except that white men or white women who were citizens by marriage received appointments. One of the early day white teachers was a Miss Esther Smith who had taught many years in the mission schools of the American Board among the Cherokees. Miss Smith once taught at Peavine School, (in old Goingsnake District, now Adair County), after leaving the employ of the Missionary Board

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in the 1850's. When the Civil War was being fought Miss Smith went to Fort Gibson as a matter of safety and after some time was attacked by illness which proved fatal. She was buried in the grounds in which burials were made not greatly distant from the military post. The grave was not marked with an inscribed stone. Several years after the close of the war the present National Cemetery, east of Fort Gibson, was laid out and the graves of soldiers who had served in the United States Army were transferred to the new cemetery. The coffin of Miss Smith was among many which were taken to the cemetery and she now lies among the unidentified dead. The headstone at the grave bears the single word, "Unknown".

Teachers in the Cherokee public schools received small compensation in comparison with the salaries paid teachers in the Oklahoma schools of today, (1938). Usually the Cherokee teachers were paid the sum of about \$35.00 a month. Out of this sum they paid their board and other expenses. Nevertheless, a number of men and women taught many years. A specified number of pupils

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were required to attend the terms of school. Unless an average was maintained during the year, the school could be, and was, sometimes discontinued and re-established in some other locality. This was in accordance with the laws governing the national public schools.

In case there was an attendance above the average the teacher received \$1.00 for each additional pupil. A man who taught for a considerable period took advantage of the law when he applied for and was appointed teacher of a largely attended negro school. There were several such schools in which the pupils were children of former slaves of Cherokee citizens. The former slaves and their descendants had been granted the rights of Cherokee citizenship, according to an article of the Treaty of 1866, between the United States and the Cherokees. Consequently public schools were provided by the Cherokees for the negroes. The man who engaged in teaching negro pupils, in a locality in which there were many colored people, enrolled sixty pupils, and instructed forty-five of the youthful negroes for which instruction he received \$1.00 for each pupil. But eventually only negro teachers were employed in the negro schools.

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White children occasionally attended Cherokee public schools. In some localities there lived white families, the men usually employed in farming land belonging to Cherokees. Such persons could send their children to the Cherokee school upon paying a small sum, monthly, usually \$1.00, to the teacher, after permission had been granted by the Board of Directors, three in number.

Among the oldest Cherokee schools outlying from Tahlequah were those known as the Hungry Mountain School and the Caney School. Appointments of teachers were made by the Superintendent of Education, or by the Board of Education which was composed of three members. The Board of Education was more often in authority, but at intervals only a Superintendent of Education had charge of schools.