

5311

INDEX CARDS

Shedley, Joseph
Churches--Choctaw Nation
Allotment--Choctaw
Nail, Morris
Freedmen--Choctaw
Intoxicants--Choctaw Nation
Crime--Choctaw Nation
Law enforcement--Choctaw
Licenses--Choctaw
Removals--Choctaw
Farming--Choctaw Nation
Houses--Choctaw Nation
Household manufactures--Choctaw
Distills--Choctaw Nation
Cell bridges--Choctaw Nation
Schools--Choctaw Nation
Political parties--Democrats

Field Worker: Gomer Gower
 April 22, 1937.

Interview with William Leslie Smedley & wife, Ann,
 Poteau, Oklahoma.

Born March 16, 1861, Oct. 25, 1859.
 Sebastian County, Arkansas,
 Near line of Indian Territory.

Parents John R. Smedley (Father)
 Tennessee, buried on Nail Prairie.

REMINISCENCES OF WILLIAM LESLIE SMEDLEY and
 his wife, Ann Smedley.

Mr. Smedley was born March 16, 1861, near what is now Hartford, Sebastian County, Arkansas, and moved with his parents to what was then known as "Nail Prairie", and now known as Smedley Prairie" in what is now LeFlore County, Oklahoma, in January, 1873. He has been a continuous resident of this vicinity since that time.

Mrs. Smedley was born October 25, 1859 in the same community where Mr. Smedley was born and moved with her parents to the Indian Territory in the fall of 1873,

where the family settled in the same community as the Smedley family. She and Mr. Smedley were united in marriage on November 7, 1882.

Joseph Smedley, the grand-father of William Leslie Smedley, was a missionary preacher and teacher among

the Indians and traveled extensively in the prosecution of his work. In appreciation of his services, the tribal authorities made him a grant of one hundred and sixty acres of land for the use of himself and his descendants "as long as grass grows and water runs."

It was upon this tract of land that the Smedleys settled in 1873, and which afterward became the home of William Leslie and Ann Smedley. At the time allotment of land was made to the Indians, the Dawes Commission held that the grant of land held by the Smedleys was invalid and the home was allotted to a Choctaw Indian named Willis.

They recall that Morris Nail, a fullblood Choctaw Indian, for whom the aforementioned "Nail Prairie" was called and for whom "Nail-Creek" is still called, was held in high regard, not only by the Choctaw Indians, but also by all the whites who lived in that community and served as a representative of his people in their tribal councils. Morris Nail was assassinated in 1872, one year before the arrival of the Smedleys in the Indian Territory, by a negro who was known merely as Reuben and was the son of a negro known only as

Reuben and was the son of a negro known only as Buck; the latter having been a slave in the Nail family. The death of Morris Nail was mourned by all who knew him. The Smedleys had learned of the murder of Nail at the time it occurred as their home in Sebastian County, Arkansas, was but a few miles distant from the Nail home in the Indian Territory.

They also recall that in Territorial Days the community was regarded as being law abiding, especially so when it is considered that it was but a short distance to the Arkansas State Line where the restrictions on the sale of intoxicants were less rigid than were those in the Territory. This condition rather encouraged lawlessness, since it was an easy matter for violators of the law to cross the state line, commit their acts of lawlessness, and make their escape before they could be apprehended. These violations consisted principally of the introduction of intoxicants and the sale of same to residents of the Territory. It was probably this condition that was the primary cause of the formation of a band of five young Indian outlaws, who in defiance of Tribal laws,

launched upon a period of outlawry which culminated in their apprehension, trial, conviction and execution in the fall of 1873. They were tried before a Tribal Court held on "Buck Creek Prairie" in the summer of that year, and were convicted and sentenced to be shot sometime later. They were given their freedom until the date set for their execution without bond of any sort other than their honor. The band was led by Lewis Terrell. In accordance with Tribal custom they each were permitted to select their executioners, preferably one of their kinsmen. The place selected for the execution was at the foot of the west side of Sugar Loaf Mountain. On the date set for the execution each one of the convicted men appeared, ready to atone with his life to the offended law. No mercy was asked; no mercy was given. A small white cloth was pinned to the breast of each one as he stood for execution. The fatal boom of the guns was heard as each one slumped in death. Such stoicism is worthy of a nobler death than that which befell these unfortunate and misguided young Indians.

On another occasion, Charles Wilson, an Indian Agent, who also lived on "Nail Prairie," was engaged in collecting and receipting for permits granted to residents other than Indians which was in the amount of Five Dollars per annum for heads of families. In the discharge of these duties he was required to cover a large territory on horseback. One night in the fall of 1882, when he was returning to his home after having made a trip to a distant part of his district, he was waylaid and shot off his horse at a point near what is now Howe. His assailants were not apprehended, nor was the reason for the crime disclosed; but it was rumored that some of the Indians were not satisfied with his method of accounting for the funds which he collected as Agent.

From the accounts given Mr. and Mrs. Smedley by some of the Indians who were in the "removal," it appears that the "removal" from Alabama and Mississippi of the Choctaws began in a small way in the early Eighteen Thirties and that the larger group was removed later. Those who had come first and built their cabins were required to provide shelter and homes for those who came later. Under these conditions, sometimes three and four

families were domiciled in one cabin until such time as a building site could be located and a home erected for those who had been thrown upon the hospitality of their neighbors. It seems, too, that the Choctaws had advanced considerably in the arts of agriculture and animal husbandry while they were quartered in the states of Alabama and Mississippi, they immediately put in "Tom Fuller" patches of ground on which to raise their subsistence. Game of all kinds was plentiful. Hogs flourished on the ample supply of mast. The cane brakes in the Poteau River bottoms afforded cattle and horses abundant feed and shelter in the winter months, while in the summer months stock waxed fat in knee high grass on boundless prairies.

There being no sawmills in the country, and no lumber available, the houses were constructed of hewn logs, clapboard roofs and puncheon floors. Door frames were made of timber, split and cut the desired length and fastened in place with wooden pegs as nails were not available. All cooking was done on open fireplaces with which each home was provided.

Dutch ovens were used for baking purposes. Spoons for household purposes were made of cow horn, which when properly made and polished, became ornamental as well as useful. In the earlier period after the removal, deer skins were converted into containers for bear grease. This was accomplished by exercising extreme care when skinning the animal to avoid making unnecessary slits in the skin. After skinning, the hide would be rubbed briskly at intervals with small oval shaped stones until it became pliant and soft. The slits would then be securely tied and the container used for the purpose mentioned. Bear grease was highly prized for cooking purposes and was so used when available instead of lard.

The nearest mill was located at a point about two miles East of what is now the village of Hartford, Arkansas; and a distance of about twelve miles from the Smedley home on Nail Prairie. It was at this mill that all the grinding of meal and flour was done. It was operated by John R. and Benjamin Smedley, father and uncle of William Leslie Smedley, respectively, until after the close of the Civil War.

They were both exempt from military duty for the period of the War because of their operation of the mill which was kept busy at all times providing meal and flour for the military forces as well as to noncombatants.

Fort Smith, Arkansas was the principal trading point before the town of Hartford, Arkansas was established. To reach Fort Smith from the Nail Prairie, the old Fort Smith and Fort Towson military road was used. This road crossed the Backbone Mountain at a point about nine miles south of Fort Smith. It was at this point that a toll road was located and operated from time to time by various individuals and was finally opened for travel without the payment of a toll.

The burial custom of the Indians was to bury their dead in the immediate vicinity of their homes, each home having its own burial plat. For this reason it is difficult to locate the burial places of those who passed on in earlier periods. The spot where the prominent Choctaw Indian, Morris Nail, is buried is now a part of a large field and no trace of it can be found. Community life of the settlement was all that could be desired under the circumstances.

Religious services were held from time to time; as circuit riding ministers would make their calls. Schools were held periodically, depending entirely upon individual subscriptions for support. Under these conditions the Smedleys reared to maturity a family of ten children. They have passed through all the various changes in governmental affairs and forms, which have taken place since their entrance into the Indian Territory in 1873. Thus it is apparent that it would be indeed difficult to find people, now living, and in possession of their faculties in a marked degree as these good people are, who are better fitted to direct our thoughts toward occurrences of a period fraught with vast and sweeping changes in the mode of life of those who lived through it.

It is also recalled that at the time of the election of delegates to the Constitutional Convention, prior to statehood, the lines were sharply drawn as between the Republicans and the Democrats who aspired to be elected as delegates from this district. An aspirant named Johnson, a former Democrat, perceiving

a possible advantage to himself through this sharp drawing of the lines, announced his own candidacy for the position as an Independent. The higher lights, seeing the possible defeat of their Democratic candidate through the action of Mr. Johnson, sought and obtained the assistance of the then Senator Jeff Davis of Arkansas in squelching the disloyal Johnson. On the arrival of Senator Davis in Poteau, he addressed a large concourse of people and proceeded with his castigation of Mr. Johnson in language which only the Senator knew how to use and climaxed his exorciation of the deserting Mr. Johnson by relating a story of a farmer who resided in his own state--Arkansas. The farmer was the possessor of several cows and a male which he kept in a pasture. On one occasion, after the milking was done in the morning, one of the calves slipped out of the pen with its mother and the cows. The farmer decided that he would complete his morning chores before he would try to get the calf back into the pen. He later proceeded to do this. He rounded up the cows, the male and the calf and drove them to the pen. The cows entered the pen, but the male followed by the calf tucked their tails and ran to the uttermost end of the

pasture followed by the farmer, who again drove them up to the pen. While he was engaged in opening the gate so they could enter the pen, the male and calf again, with their tails over their backs, cavorted away in the direction of the back side of the pasture. This so exasperated the farmer that he shouted at the top of his voice to the calf, "Go on, dern ye, you'll come in when it's time to suck." The Senator compared Johnson's predicament to that of the calf. The story had the desired effect upon the candidacy of Mr. Johnson.