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BROWN, MORRIS

INDIAN CUSTOMS. #12380

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Investigator, James Russell Gray,  
December 10, 1937.

Interview with Morris Brown  
Hartshorne, Oklahoma  
3 miles N.W. of town at  
old Pocahontas community.

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Indian Customs, Stomp Dances, Cries, Ball Games.

The Indian was a queer customer. He had his own ways of doing things. Nowadays a lot of Indians are just about the same as whites, what with education and all. But back when I came to Indian Territory the Indians still followed the old ways.

I came in 1832. My folks moved from Tennessee when I was about two years old. We settled where Poteau is now. When I got old enough to know about such things they were calling the place "Poteau Switch." It was just a wide place in the road, with a general store, depot, hotel, livery stable, blacksmith shop, and that's about all.

Did I ever see a stomp dance? I'll say I did though not around Poteau. Choctaw Indians lived around there. The Choctaws were not much on stomp dances. I do not recall ever seeing them do a stomp dance. It was the Creeks and the

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Plains Indians who held the dances. The Choctaws had other customs just as interesting though. They had ball games, camp meetings, cries, and just plain get-togethers.

I used to drift around a lot when I was young, and I have seen stomp dances in western Oklahoma. Up along the Washita River was Comanche and Caddo country. The Caddos and Comanches were pretty wild and fierce. The Choctaws seemed like civilized people in comparison to them. The Caddos and Comanches wore their hair long, usually braided like little girls do and they nearly all wore blankets.

These Indians were not much account to work. They drew blankets, rations and sometimes horses from the Indian Agency at Anadarko and they would trade anything they had. And they usually got cheated when they traded with white men.

If they made any kick to the agent about a trade that did not suit them the agent would come and make the white men give the Indian back whatever had been traded. If you traded a gun to an Indian for a horse, for instance, and the Indian decided he was sick of his trade or if his wife was dissatisfied the agent would come and make you give the

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Indian back his horse and you could not get your gun back, either.

I have been riding over the plains lots of times and a band of Comanches would come by. They had been to Abandarko usually and had blankets and stuff that they wanted to trade. They would come riding up like they meant to scalp a fellow and then they would say "Howya John?" They called everyone John.

Then they would ask, "Where you from?" If you said that you were from Arkansas, they would say, "Good man!" But if you said you were from Texas, they would call you a name that I will not repeat; they hated the Texans. We got so we always told all the Indians we were from Arkansas.

The Comanches held stomp dances every summer. They would get together and stay maybe a week at a time, just eating and dancing. They would dance any time that they felt like it. I have seen them dancing at all times during the day and night. At night they would build up a big fire and dance around it.

There was a leader, usually an elder Indian. He would lead the dance in a circle at night around the fire. He sang

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a sort of song or chant in the Indian tongue. The other Indians would dance after him, some of them shouting and prancing louder and higher than others. A stomp dance was usually pretty noisy and also pretty exciting. I liked the dances; I have danced with the Indians lots of times.

I did not start drifting out to the western part of Oklahoma until after 1900. I lived around Poteau and later Scullyville and north and west of Poteau.

I started drifting around when I was about twenty-one. I traded some. I would take a few horses and trade or sell them to the farmers and ranchers. I would work on the ranches; sometimes I worked in the coal mines in eastern Oklahoma. There were mines strung out from McAlester to Fort Smith almost. I drifted out to the western country and all around Oklahoma until I have lost count, but I always ended up back around Poteau and Scullyville.

I can tell you about the Choctaw cries that I saw when I was a boy. The Choctaws liked to get together for any reason and they always had a feast when they got together. They would cook venison, beef, cornbread; they were crazy about cornbread, pork, turkey, and coffee. An Indian liked

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anything to drink and he loved coffee and the Indians had a dish they made out of corn that they called Tom Fuller. They made this stuff by beating corn in a hole in a stump or block. They soaked off the hulls and cooked the corn. Sometimes they added beans, peas or anything they had to the mess and it was good.

The Choctaws would have their cries something like we have Decoration Day or at least that is the impression I got of it. I was just a boy and did not pay much attention. They would get together every summer for these cries. They would have church services first and then would go out in the cemetery and cry. Each Indian went and cried over the graves of his ancestors.

They didn't have any certain length of time to stay at a cry; it all depended on how they felt and upon how the food held out. They might eat and cry for a week.

I have seen lots of their ball games. The first one I remember, though, was down below where Red Oak is. There was a place there called Brown's Prairie and that is where they played ball. That was in 1904,

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They were holding a sort of picnic and feast there and I would say that there were a hundred Choctaws present. They played a ball game as part of the entertainment; one game during the picnic.

One side was from the old Scullyville County.

There was a lot of excitement because some of the well-to-do cattlemen had bet on the game and they kept urging the players on, sometimes shooting in the air in their efforts to spur them on.

A game might last a long time. I think this one I am telling you about lasted four hours. The field was a big one with nearly a quarter of a mile between the goals. The goals were ten-inch boards fixed into the ground and running up about fourteen feet high. When a player hit the goal of the other team with the ball that counted a tally for his side; the side getting the most tallies won.

What one thing do I remember most dearly about the Indians and their customs? Well, I'd say I remember that concoction they called Tom Fuller.