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Excerpt from Manuscript of  
"My Educational Experience"  
By John D. Benedict

I arrived in Muskogee, Indian Territory, on the 27th day of February, 1899, only a few days after the big fire which had destroyed practically all the business section of the town, including the depot and only hotel. Muskogee was then a muddy town of about 4,000 people and a lot of cheaply built houses. The people were but squatters--in the sense that not one of them had title to the lot upon which he had erected his home or shop. The title to the real estate was still vested in the Indian tribe. I soon learned that each of the Five Tribes had its own school laws, its own school system, its own school buildings, its own teachers and its own schools and school laws had been in operation for half a century or longer, during all of which time, the Federal Government had had nothing whatever to do with them, they having been constructed, managed and maintained exclusively by the Indian Tribes.

My feelings can scarcely be imagined upon learning that every one of these tribal officials insisted that the Federal Government had no right to assume any control whatever over their schools and that, as a Federal school official, I had

no business here. I felt very much like "The Man Without a Country" and I longed to be back in the pine forests of Arizona.

I soon learned that the Secretary of the Interior based his right to control the schools of the Five Tribes upon one little clause of the Curtis Act, which had just been passed by Congress and which read:

"No tribal funds shall hereafter be paid to the tribal officials for distribution, but shall be disbursed under such rules as the Secretary of the Interior shall prescribe."

The Tribal officials thought that they would be allowed to remain in control of their schools and other institutions just as they had been for fifty or more years, and that the Secretary would simply provide a method of paying their bills. But the Secretary of the Interior held that, inasmuch as Congress had placed upon him the responsibility of properly disbursing the funds of the Tribes, he must see that competent superintendents and teachers were employed, and that involved the control of the schools.

The Cherokee schools were controlled by a Board of Education consisting of three members elected by the Cherokee

council.

In the Choctaw Nation, the Principal Chief was the President of his Board of Education, the other members being a superintendent and three trustees chosen by the tribe.

In each of the other tribes, the schools were controlled by a superintendent, elected by the tribal council, who must have been a member of the tribe. Some of the tribes had laws which provided that only citizens of the tribe were eligible to the responsible position of superintendent of a boarding school, and no educational qualifications were required.

These positions were considered political patronage, handed out by members of the tribal council to the Indians who could control the most votes in their districts. Several of these boarding school superintendents were unable to converse with me in the English language, yet they were supposed to be giving the children under their charge an English education. It had been customary for the tribes to spend most of their school money upon their boarding schools, to which their favored children were sent, boarded and taught at the tribe's expense, leaving their country

schools poorly equiped and poorly taught.

As the school year was approaching its closing period, I saw that it would not be advisable to make any immediate changes, but I devoted my time to getting acquainted with educational conditions and people, hoping that by the end of that school year I could convince the Indians that I was here to help them and that it would be necessary to make some radical changes in order to effect much improvement, but every suggestion which I made, looking toward improvement, was invariably met with the reply that "It could not be done because it was not in accord with the laws of the tribe".

(See Cherokee Schools, Scrap Book, pages 3 and 17)

(See Choctaw Schools, Scrap Book, pages 7 and 9, column 2)

(See Creek Schools, Scrap Book, pages 8 and 11)

I cannot undertake to describe in detail all of my experiences with the various tribal school authorities, some of which were discouraging and perplexing, but will relate one of my earliest experiences in the Creek Nation. The Creek schools were under the absolute control of a tribal superintendent appointed by the Creek Council. They had ten boarding schools and sixty-five day schools, the tribal superintendent being an uneducated half-breed, who resided

on his farm. Whenever he came to Muskogee, I tried to find him and talk with him about school work, but he shunned me as much as possible, telling his friends that he did not need my assistance, and that he did not intend for me to have anything to do with the management of Creek schools.

I soon learned that the majority of the teachers were totally incompetent, many of them admitting to me their incompetency by way of apology and saying that they had never had any help of any kind, nor any summer normals. I concluded that I would try to arrange with the tribal superintendent to give the teachers of the Creek Nation a summer normal, immediately following the close of their schools in the month of June of that first year, 1899. I hunted up the tribal superintendent and proposed the summer term for teachers, but he assured me that he held a normal every summer for teachers, and intimated that he knew just how it ought to be conducted, without my assistance. I proposed to him that the normal be held immediately after closing schools in June, as the teachers would all be here at that time. He objected, saying that the Creek law required him to hold it in August. I then tried to persuade him that the normal should be held in Muskogee, inasmuch as Okmulgee had no railroad. But he

objected, saying that the Creek law required that it be held in Okmulgee, the Capital of the Creek Nation.

I mentioned the matter of selecting some instructors who would be competent to teach the teachers something, but he assured me that he would see to that.

I had heard that the annual weekly normals which he had held were rather farcical, so I finally decided that I would let him go ahead and "organize" his summer normal as usual and that I would attend merely as a visitor. I intended, however, at the close of his normal, to assert my right to see that a fair examination of teachers was conducted. On the day preceding the opening of the normal, in company with my assistant for the Creek Nation, I drove, with team and buggy, from Muskogee to Okmulgee.

Okmulgee consisted, at that time, principally of a row of frame houses built around their public square, in the center of which stood the Creek Capitol building, in which building the normal was to be held. Okmulgee had but one hotel, a little two-story frame shack, which was already crowded with teachers when I arrived. I looked around and finally obtained permission to sleep in a little room on the second floor of Captain Sever's store, which faced the

Capitol building.

On the next morning, the teachers, about sixty in number, began to assemble in the main hall of the building and, at nine o'clock, the bell rang for the opening ceremonies. I found a seat in the rear of the room, but was entirely ignored by the teachers. They had been warned against recognizing me and had been told that, if I were permitted to have anything to do with the examination, I would make it so severe that none of them could pass it. The Creek superintendent called the meeting to order, and after a song and prayer by one of the boarding school superintendents, the tribal superintendent announced that they were assembled for their annual institute and he proceeded to collect a dollar from each teacher. He announced that the dollar was his postage fund for the year. He pocketed the money, told the teachers to go ahead and organize their normal, and left the room.

The teachers proceeded to "organize" by electing a 200 pound country teacher as President. Then, with as much parliamentary pomp as would be required to organize Congress, they perfected their organization by electing a first vice-president, a second vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer

and a marshal-at-arms. I wondered what the duties of the last-named official would be, he being given an elevated seat at the right of the president, but I learned later that his was a responsible position. After the "organization" was perfected, the president announced the appointment of a committee of three to prepare a program for the week's work.

To my surprise, no one had been selected to take any part in the exercises of the week--no instructors, no lecturers.

The program committee retired to a private room and, without taking the pains to find out whether any of the teachers had come prepared to discuss any of the subjects or give any instruction, they arbitrarily arranged a program, in about five minutes, which ran something like this:

Your committee begs leave to report that we have prepared a program for the week, as follows:

- Arithmetic.....Mr. John Simpkins
- Reading.....Miss Susie Drinkwater
- Grammar.....Mr. Bill McGilbra
- Geography.....Miss Peggy Peters
- History.....Mr. Jasper Overalls  
&c, &c.

When the program committee made this report, the president somewhat boldly announced that the Institute was now completely organized and that, insasmuch as the noon hour had almost arrived, they would adjourn until one o'clock, P. M., at which time he warned all teachers to return to the hall, preparatory to entering upon the real work of the week.

At one P. M., the bell rang again, the teachers assembled and, after another song, the president congratulated the teachers for their promptness and upon the prospect of a week's profitable work. He then announced that they would now proceed, without any further preliminaries, to carry out the program which had been arranged.

The president then said: "The first thing on our program will be an exercise in Arithmetic by Mr. John Simpkins." For a moment, a deathly silence seemed to pervade the hall, but there was no response from Mr. Simpkins. The president, turning to the right, said: "Marshal-at-arms, where is Mr. Simpkins?" The marshal-at-arms arose from his elevated seat and, after saluting the president and looking around the hall, replied: "Mr. President, I fail to find Mr. Simpkins." The president, with some manifestation of indignation, exclaimed: "Mr. Marshal-at-Arms, you will proceed to produce Mr. Simpkins."

The marshal-at-arms dignifiedly walked out of the hall and around the public square, returning to the hall in about ten minutes and reporting that he had been unable to locate Mr. Simpkins. The president rather indignantly announced that they would deal with Mr. Simpkins later, but that he would not let Mr. Simpkins' absence interfere with their program.

The president then announced that the next thing on the program would be "an exercise in Reading, by Miss Susie Drinkwater". Another moment of profound silence ensued, while waiting for Miss Drinkwater to respond to the call of the president, and then the command of the president to the Marshal-at-Arms, to produce Miss Drinkwater. The Marshal-at-Arms again scoured the town and returned to the hall and reported that she was no where to be found.

In the same manner, the president and marshal proceeded to the end of the program, without finding any one of the teachers who had been assigned to parts on the program. Every one of them had hidden out, and could not be blamed for so doing, for they had been given no notice nor time to prepare any exercises.

When the pompous president had reached the end of his

program without getting any response from anyone, he seemed to be at a loss to know just what to do next. After a few moments more of suspense, a teacher arose and rather timidly announced that he understood that Mr. Benedict, the U. S. Superintendent of schools, was present and perhaps he would like to say a few words. The chairman seemed to hesitate for a moment (they had all been told to pay no attention to me), and he then asked me if I would like to say anything. I arose from my seat in the rear of the hall and told the chairman that I did not desire to interfere with the regular work of his program, but that when he was through with it, I would be glad to talk to the teachers. The chairman replied; "Well, I reckon we might as well hear you now." I walked to the platform upon which the president sat and, assuming as pleasant an attitude as it was possible for me to assume, I told the teachers that I was glad to be with them, that I wanted to become acquainted with each one and that I was anxious to help them in any way I could. I then presented some methods of teaching arithmetic and, in doing so, I asked them some simple questions, which they seemed proud of being able to answer. I purposely made my questions simple, at first, in order to overcome the impression

which I knew they possessed, to the effect that I was expected to be severe with them. I had not proceeded very far until I noticed that the teachers in the rear of the hall began to come forward and take seats nearer the front. I do not remember just how long I talked to them that afternoon, but I asked them a number of easy questions, answered some questions from them, and illustrated a number of simple methods of teaching arithmetic.

During that afternoon, I accomplished the task which I was anxious to accomplish, viz: that of convincing the teachers that I was their friend-not their enemy; that I was there to help them and not to hurt them. To my surprise, at the close of my talk, the teachers voted to extend to me an invitation to come back after supper and talk to them again. At the night session, I talked to the teachers from 8:00 o'clock until 9:30, then went across the hall into another room where the negro teachers were meeting and talked to them for an hour. It was a very hot August night and, when I went across the street to my room over the store at 11:00 P. M., I was as wet with perspiration as if I had jumped into a river. About midnight, my supervisor woke me up, saying he thought he heard some men down on the street in front

of our room, cursing our proposed examination. It was a bright moonlight night and, as I got up and looked out of the window, I recognized the Creek superintendents, wrestling and reeling around on the edge of the street, both gloriously drunk.

The next morning, the Creek superintendent failed to report at the institute but his comrade seemed to think he ought to be present, drunk or sober. He came into the hall at the opening of the next morning's session but was so drunk that he had to be escorted from the hall.

During the remaining days of the week, I had no trouble in getting acquainted with the teachers, many of whom came to me begging that I do not make the examination too severe for them, saying that they had never had any help nor any opportunity to improve, having never had summer normals worthy of the name. I could not avoid sympathizing with them, under the circumstances, and purposely made the examination as easy as possible. At the close of the week's work, the teachers voted unanimously to ask me to give them a four weeks' normal during the next summer, and as a result, I gave them a four weeks' review term every summer thereafter during my eleven year's term. (See pages 8 and 58, Scrap Book)

On the following week, I learned that the Creek superintendent had begun to appoint teachers and boarding school superintendents for the ensuing year, regardless of our examination. I felt that the time had come when I must either demonstrate my authority over the Indian schools, or resign my position, for the school officials of the other tribes were watching, with a good deal of interest, the outcome of the squabble over the Creek schools. I notified him that the teachers appointed by him would receive no pay unless their names were submitted for my approval before they entered upon their next year's work. I also notified him that I could not consent to retain the boarding school superintendent who was drunk at the Institute. He then removed that superintendent but, without consulting me, but he appointed another in his place, who, I learned, was no better qualified than the first one. When I notified him that I could not consent to his new appointment, the man just appointed wrote me that he was in possession of the boarding school and he intended to stay there.

After vainly trying for several days to persuade the new appointee to vacate, I called upon the U. S. Indian agent for the services of one of his most reliable Indian

policeman. Captain West, a noted Indian policeman of the old-time Territorial days, was assigned to me and I instructed him to go that boarding school, put the man out who was in possession, and install a new superintendent whom I had assigned to that position. When the Captain appeared at the school building, wearing his two six-shooters, which it was customary for those old-time Indian police to wear, the man in charge threw up his hands and exclaimed: "Oh Captian, I dont want any trouble; I am ready to go."

(See pages 11 and 19, Scrap Book.)

The remainder of Mr. Benedict's manuscript deals with his organization of Indian Territory schools, and may be found in his official reports published in the year book of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.