

GRAY, WALTER

THIRD INTERVIEW

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Hartshorne, Okla.  
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### Dance of the Green Corn

From an interview with Mr. Walter Gray, 1 mi. N. of Hartshorne.  
Address: Hartshorne, Okla.

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The sun had just gone down, and it was early night (Mr. Gray began). There was no moon, but the stars were thick and bright. And I could feel excitement tensing the muscles of my abdomen and making my heart beat faster.

I wish I could make you see all this just as I saw it that June night back in the old Creek Nation forty-four years ago. There we were; three white men going to an Indian dance, and we knew there wouldn't be any more white men at the dance. There were only six white men living in a radius of twenty-five miles, and we knew where the other three were.

There would be hundreds of Indians at the dance; this was the "New Yorker" dancing ground just ahead, and the New Yorker community had a big population scattered about on little farms in the vicinity of New Yorker Creek.

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We were walking along a narrow, rutted road; deep sand, and the fact that the road sloped slightly upward, made walking difficult. The old road--it must have been old because it was worn down a foot or more--was lined on each side with brush and small trees.

One of my companions, a young man about twenty-something, grunted and stopped walking. His name was ~~Frank Payne. Jeff Gentry~~, my other companion, grasped my arm and we both stopped too.

Ahead of us the sky was red. "That's the dancing fire," Jeff said. He was older than Frank or I, and he had seen the Indians dance before.

I gazed with open mouth, awed and thrilled; I was sixteen then, and impressionable. I lived within three miles of this place, but my family hadn't been in this community long, and I had never been to any of the big Indian gatherings before.

We began walking again, and pretty soon we came to horses grazing; Indian horses, hundreds of them. Some were hobbled, some tied with long ropes, and some merely turned loose to wander as they would.

We began to hear sounds from the camp ahead of us. We heard the barking of dogs, shouts, and loud laughter. Words reached us, too, but they were Creek and I couldn't understand the language much then.

The brush thinned out, giving way to grass, and we could see the huge camp. The fire in the middle leaped high in the air, casting a sort of wavering, unreal light over milling Indians, tents, wagons, and brush arbors.

"That camp covers at least fifteen acres," Jeff whispered at my elbow. "Some of them Indians have ~~come all the way from Okmulgee.~~" Okmulgee was twenty-five miles or so to the north and east.

We reached the edge of the camp. Wagons, hacks, and buggies were scattered all around. We approached a big covered wagon; the tongue was propped up by the neck yoke, and harness was hanging on the tongue. An Indian came around the wagon and knelt behind it.

"Co-mog-a-dee!" Jeff said. I knew that was a greeting of some sort in Creek; it meant about the same as "howdy."

The Indian didn't answer. He got down on his hands and knees and began to vomit. And he was doing a thorough job, if sound was to be trusted.

Jeff laughed, and Frank said, "I know about that. All the Indians drink something that makes them throw up before they eat the green corn. The stuff they drink is made out of herbs or something by their medicine man."

Jeff caught my arm and drew me forward a few steps. "See that little tent?" he asked. "That's the medicine man in there now. You can hear him blowing into the medicine through a pipe, and chanting."

I looked at a small canvas tent, and sure enough I heard someone muttering or singing in a low, indistinct voice. And every now and then the muttering would stop, and I could hear a bubbling sound as though air was being forced under water.

We went forward again, keeping close together. "Gosh, I'm kind of scared among all these Indians," Jeff whispered. He was just trying to have some fun out of me, but I didn't find that out until later. I didn't say anything, but felt like turning around and running away from there as fast as I could.

We reached the edge of the dance ground; the big fire was burning in the center of a huge square. Brush arbors and benches formed the square. The Indians sat on the benches or moved about under the arbors, but the space around the fire was empty. And those Indians were talking and laughing as though they enjoyed themselves.

I hid behind a tree and watched them. Of course there wasn't any danger; that was in 1893, you know, and the Creeks were pretty well civilized--some well educated.

While I watched, an old Indian stepped out to the fire. He went up to within ten or twelve feet; then he stopped. He turned his side to the fire and took a slow step forward. He said, "Hee! Hee!"

He began to circle the fire, taking queer, hopping steps. There was rhythm in his steps, like a drum beating. He chanted a little song that went ~~something like this: "Hee! Hee! Hee oh hee!"~~

Another Indian jumped up and ran out to join the first one. He followed the first Indian, doing exactly the same things. At intervals other Indians would join the dance. And I noticed that the dance-step had changed; it was now a quick, stiff-legged shuffle.

Finally there were nearly two hundred of them out there, all dancing and chanting in unison. The chant had changed too, I noticed; it was a sort of song now, smoother and with more words than at first.

Then the women got into the dance. They formed a ring outside the men, and went 'round and 'round with them. I became conscious of a rattling sound; it went, "Chink, chink! Chink, chink, chink!"

"Hear that!" Jeff whispered. "That's caused by pebbles rattling in terrapin shells. The women wear 'em strapped to their ankles."

I got over my first feeling of fright and went to sit on a bench with Frank and Jeff. When the Indians had been dancing for quite a while--half an hour at least--Jeff said suddenly, "Wouldn't we feel scared if they'd come running right at us?" The son-of-a-gun, he knew what was about to happen.

There was a tall pole in front of us, at the edge of the dance ground. On top of the pole was the skull of a cow.

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With a sudden whooping and shouting the Indians left the fire and came charging toward us. I had hold of Jeff's arm, and I'll bet I nearly squeezed it in two, but I didn't move. Somehow I knew they weren't going to hurt us.

They came to the pole with the skull on it, and began to dance around it. Each Indian seemed to be trying to scream as loud as he could. Only the men were dancing now; the women had faded into the shadows.

And all the time that this dancing was going on I could hear Indians vomiting on the outskirts of the camp. They went a few at a time.

The dancing stopped, and the Indians left the vicinity of the fire and came back to the benches and arbors. Some sat down to rest; others walked about; some went away toward their wagons and tents.

After a while they must have decided that they wanted some more dancing, because they started in all over again. Some of them were Indians that hadn't danced before. Jeff and Frank and I joined in, too, this time.

The Indians would dance and then rest, and this went on until about three o'clock in the morning. Then they began to drift off to bed. Some of them slept in the tents, and some under the brush arbors. A lot of them just lay down on the grass under the sky, and slept that way. That's the way I slept. Yes, I stayed there all night; you couldn't have run me off with a club. Frank and Jeff stayed too.

I woke up the next morning to the sounds of a stirring camp; the Indians were talking, laughing, and moving about. Little cooking fires winked in the fading darkness, and the sun was just coming up in the east. Frank and Jeff were already sitting up and rubbing their eyes.

"I'm going to see what this place looks like," I said. "Do you fellows want to walk around with me?"

"No, we've seen Indian camps before," Jeff said. "And you better not go off by yourself; no telling what these bloodthirsty fellows would do to you."

I laughed; I was on to his game by now. I stepped over a wagon tongue, and wandered off to watch a

woman cooking at a small fire under a post-oak tree; she was making coffee and frying some sort of meat in a skillet. She looked up and nodded to me.

I went on to watch a small Indian boy chasing a puppy; the boy tripped and fell on his nose, and I couldn't help laughing. I began to feel at home among these people; why, they were human beings the same as me.

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Men and women greeted me as I passed through the camp; they were friendly and cheerful. I began to see Indians that I knew--Joe Finhaw; Wilson Beaver; one of the Ho-dul-gee boys.

I was watching a pretty Indian girl carrying a bucket of water from the creek when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to find young Joe Fixigo grinning at me. He was about a year younger than I, and he lived only half a mile from my house. He was probably the raggedest boy I have ever seen; there wasn't a square inch of his clothing, I bet, that wasn't patched or in need of patching. But he was as jolly as if he owned a mint.

"You having a good time?" he asked.

"You bet!" I exclaimed. "I'll never forget all this."

"Hee-ently!" he said, accenting the "hee."

"What does that mean?" I wanted to know.

He laughed delightedly. "That is our way of saying good," he told me.

We went back toward the dance ground, and joined Frank and Jeff who were watching some of the women carrying food to a long table. I noticed five of these tables altogether; they were made by driving forked sticks into the ground and laying small poles through the forks, and then putting other poles across the first ones.

The Indians were gathering about the tables. Except for their dark skins I might have mistaken them for a bunch of white people at a picnic; they wore about the same sort of clothes. They were fond of bright colors, though; dresses and shirts were often red, green, or purple, and many of the men had feathers in their hats. They wore their hair rather long, but then so did most of the whites at that time.

They began to eat; some of them, though, were not approaching the tables. I wondered why they were fasting.

"They haven't taken the vomit medicine yet," Jeff said. "They have to throw up before they can eat the new corn; it's a sort of ceremony with them, I guess."

Lots of the Indians could talk English, and we weren't allowed to feel that we were outsiders. Men going toward the tables would stop to ask how we felt or to tell us that the corn crop was good that year.

At the table nearest us were three old men with staffs about four feet long in their hands. One of them came up to me and grasped me by the arm; he pushed me gently toward the table, pointing with his staff.

"Better go with him," Frank said. "They will be insulted if we don't eat."

I didn't need any urging; I felt starved. I got a tin cup full of coffee--strong and black, with no sugar or cream--and made a sandwich out of a biscuit and a piece of pork. There was beef on the table too; a kind of small corncake made from blue Indian corn, call "bluebread," a dish called "sof-kee" made of corn boiled and slightly fermented. And, of course, the new corn, boiled on the cob.

I saw Joe Fixigo gnawing an ear of corn. "How's everything? All right?", he asked, with his friendly grin. I grinned back at him. "Hee-ently!", I said.

After we had eaten, Frank and Jeff wanted to go home. I tried to get them to stay awhile longer; I hated to leave.

Jeff laughed. "Now look," he said, "you can come back tonight. The Creeks always hold their green corn dance for at least four nights, and there won't be any more dancing until night."

Frank and Jeff started off, picking their way among the tents and wagons, and rather unwillingly I followed. We reached the narrow, sandy road, went through the herd of grazing horses and came to the edge of the thick brush. I stopped and turned around to get a last look at the camp.

"Come on, kid," Jeff called tolerantly. "This isn't the last green corn dance you'll ever see; there is one every year."

I knew he was amused at me, but I didn't care; he just didn't understand. Of course I could come back again, but there is only one first time for anything, and I knew that I would never feel the same thrill again.