

GRAY, WALTER

SECOND INTERVIEW

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A Creek Camp Meeting
From an interview with Walter Gray
(Hartshorne, Okla.)

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I was raised among the Creek Indians in the vicinity of the Canadian River about twenty-five miles southwest of Okmulgee.

In the year 1894 I was seventeen. I left home just after the fourth of July that year and began to make my own way. And that was the year I attended my first Indian camp meeting.

I was working for a man named L. H. McDurmott. He was a white man, an Irishman, who had married a full blood Creek woman named Lou something-or-other; I never learned he maiden name. Mac was big and generous and good-natured, though he could be stern enough when angered.

I was told that McDurmott was originally from Indiana. He was a stonemason, and prior to the time of which I speak had taken a contract to build, and had built, the Creek council house at Okmulgee. After that job was completed he had, I have been told, a little over two thousand dollars. Anyway, he and his wife settled about two miles east and half a mile south of the present town of

Okemah. He began to improve the land, and built a small log cabin. When I began working for him he had a two-story frame house, and close to three sections of land under fence. He had a country store. He used the fenced land to pasture horses and mules. His cattle, branded with an "O Bar," ran loose in the woods all over that part of the country.

One Saturday in August, 1894, I was working with a haying crew on the McDermott ranch. We got through with the haying that afternoon. One of the men asked me if I wanted to go to church with him that night. His name was Luke Vye, and he had been friendly ever since I began working on the ranch. "The Indians are throwing a camp meeting," he said. "I guarantee you will find it interesting, Gray."

I think most of the haying crew went to the meeting that night, but not all together; they went in groups. I went with Luke. The church house was four or five miles west and a little north of McDermott's ranch house, and Luke and I got there just before sundown, in time for supper.

The place belonged to the Creeks, and was called the "Green Leaf" Church. It was situated on the side of a hill that sloped north and east. The hillside was covered with post oaks and blackjack trees. On the east, at the foot of the hill, ran a small creek. This creek ran

into another one on the north side of the hill. This second creek, I believe, was called Green Leaf Creek. The Indians watered their horses and got water to drink at these creeks.

Up on the hill, about one hundred and fifty yards from the creeks, were the church grounds, the church house, and the big arbor. The house was a one-room log building with clapboard roof and puncheon floor. I don't know what it looked like inside; this meeting I am telling about was held under the arbor. One of my Indian friends told me the church house had a split-log floor and log benches.

When Luke Vye and I got to the church grounds that Saturday night we found Indians camped all over the place, among the oaks on the hillside, and even down in the creek bottoms. There were so many that I wouldn't want to make a guess at the actual number. But I found out before I left that there were seven tribes represented in the crowd. There were some Sac and Fox, Creeks, Chickasaws, Osages, Pottawatomies, Kickapoos. And Luke pointed out some fat, round-faced Indian women and said they were Cheyennes. Those women wore showy, reddish dresses of some cotton material that looked like calico. They wore their hair in two long braids down their backs, and almost all of them had beads around their necks.

I am not certain just what the occasion for this

meeting was; whether it was a reunion, or a convention, or what. I know that it was religious in nature, so I am going to call it a camp meeting.

At supper time the Indians spread their meal on long tables under the trees around the church house and arbor. These tables were made of poles and planks, and were twenty feet or more long. Along each side of the tables were benches made of split logs; holes were made in the logs, and wooden pegs driven into the holes for legs. There was plenty of food for all, even the visitors. The main foods were bread, meat, coffee, and the Creek dish made of fermented corn called "Sofkee." Old men with staffs in their hands went about among the crowd looking for visitors and inviting them to eat.

After supper Luke and I visited among the people on the church grounds. There were Indians, Negroes, and whites, with Indians in the majority. And there were horses, wagons, buckboards, and the like. There were women and children, and hundreds of dogs. There were some tents and covered wagons where people slept, but the majority slept under small arbors or under the trees.

I noticed that some of the Indians wore blankets. The men had long hair, often ~~longing~~ it hung down their backs in two braids. Some wore buckskin trousers and cotton shirts. I noticed one tribe that wore beaded moccasins.

The Creeks, who were in the majority at the meet-

ing, wore shirts, pants, long-legged, high-heeled boots, and big wide hats, usually white. And almost all the Indians, no matter of what tribe, wore some sort of red handkerchiefs around their necks.

The Creek boys and young men nearly all came to the meeting on horseback. They wore what was called the "O. K." spurs, having a slightly crooked shank, rowel the size of half a dollar, leather parts fitted to a metal button on each side; a leather strap ran under the heel, and another buckled on top of the foot. The Creeks sometimes carried quirts, and had slickers tied to their saddles, but I never saw but one, a man named Lewis Curtain, who wore chaps.

This meeting had been going on for about ^a week before I went to it, and it was planned to last another week, so the Indians said, before it closed. It all seemed fun and frolic to the Indians; they were all jovial and friendly and hospitable. Each tribe seemed to make a point of being nice to the white people.

We met lots of Creeks that I knew; Little Bear, Hodulgee Fixigo, Joe Finhaw, Jacob Knight, Joe Robinson, Mosey Sawyer, Sam Berryhill, Louis Yahola, Dave Yefkee, March Thompson, Ben Deer, Wallace Cook.

About an hour after sundown the crowd gathered at the arbor and the services began. A Creek got up first and led some songs; then he prayed, and after that made

a talk. He talked in Creek, but interpreters translated what he said into English and the other Indian languages. If I remember right this Creek's name was William Jimboy; he was a hunchback. He was a preacher; Methodist, I think.

That singing was probably the most beautiful I have ever heard. There weren't any instruments played; the music was all made by human voices. The Indians had ~~that~~ deep, soft voices, ~~and they~~ rose and fell in perfect harmony. They sang maybe six songs, one after the other. One was something about "Hol^{ly} Talofa," which meant "heaven" in Creek.

Representatives from each tribe got up to pray and talk during the course of the evening. There was a raised rostrum of planks where the speakers stood to talk. The audience sat on benches made of split logs resting on rocks.

The second speaker was a middle-aged Indian dressed in the same sort of clothes white men wore on Sundays; dark suit, white shirt, shoes. Luke told me that he was a Sac and Fox chief, and that his name was Keokuk. He was about five feet ten in height, and looked to be about one sixty five in weight. He had no beard or moustache. He had long, straight hair that hung loose to his shoulders. He was quick and short spoken, but had a pleasant voice and manner. I saw him on the grounds the next day, and he was wearing a large white hat with a wide brim and flat top. I can't remember what he said, but all the

talks seemed to be of a religious nature. Each speaker prayed first, and then made his talk. Sometimes between the talks there would be more singing. The services lasted that night until about two o'clock.

After that Luke Vye, Si Snodgrass, Pres Morgan, Steve Hancock, Henry Fortner, and I went out on the side ~~of the hill and slept under a tree for the rest of the~~ night. These were all white men.

Next morning we ate breakfast with the Indians. ~~After breakfast we visited around again,~~ and we met an Indian and got to talking to him. As near as I could tell he seemed about forty. He said he lived two miles and a half southwest of Okmulgee close to the ferry on Deep Fork. He had a round, fat face and was a loud laugher. He talked good English and was very friendly. He told us his name was Hodge.

I remember sitting on the ground and listening to Hodge talk. If he is still alive I'll bet he remembers the cotton-headed little white boy who asked so many questions. He sat on a bench with one of the white men, and there were other white men around him. Hodge must have been educated. He said he was religious, and was prejudiced to what he called "Sabbath school." He said he had learned a lot at "Sabbath school." He himself was a Sunday school teacher. I listened to him talk for over an hour.

Sometime after breakfast that Sunday morning the services began again. The procedure was similar to that of the night before. The Indians preached and prayed until nearly noon. Then the midday meal was eaten. After that the crowd milled around, talking and laughing, until about two o'clock. Services began again at two and held for an hour and a half.

After that Luke and I visited around, talking to the Indians and looking at them, until about an hour before sunset. Then we struck out for the McDermott ranch, getting home for a late supper.

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