

COLE, MARY

INTERVIEW

#12647

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James Russell Gray
Investigator.
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Interview with Mary Cole,
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

Choctaw Church Life.

Being a freed slave I was allowed to go to the same churches with the Choctaws and I observed their customs first hand. I see now that their methods of worship were peculiar and different from white people's customs, though I didn't know anything else then.

I was born in the Choctaw Nation eighty years ago at Perryville, west of McAlester near Savanna, though there wasn't any McAlester or Savanna then. My maiden name was Franklin; father was John Franklin, and mother was Sarah Reed. My parents were slaves; I was too, of course, but was too young to work before freedom. Our master was a Choctaw named Kachubbi.

We lived then in the western part of the Choctaw Nation; then when I was about ten— after we were freed— my parents took me to a little place called Brazil. So I don't remember much before we got to Brazil; there weren't any churches anywhere near Perryville or within thirty miles of what

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is now McAlester before we moved to Brazil.

When I was twelve we moved again, this time about three miles north of Skullyville, and it is there that I remember going to church first. The church house was a plank building, unpainted, about 20 x 30. Anyway it would hold something like fifty people and there was a brush arbor outside that would hold a hundred or more; this brush arbor was used when the house got crowded, and always in warm weather. This church, you understand, was right in Skullyville.

Now this was a Choctaw church, but we colored people were allowed to attend services with them. Then later, when the membership grew so large that there was danger of crowding, the colored members were required to hold their services at a different time than the Indians--at three in the afternoon.

Skullyville was a good sized place for those times; the population consisted of Indians mostly, but there were lots of negroes, and a few whites. On Sundays you would see all kinds of vehicles in front of

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the church, buggies, wagons, ox carts and saddled horses.

As a rule the Choctaws dressed very commonly; the women wore long dresses made of gingham or calico.

They wore shawls over their shoulders and often had red handkerchiefs tied around their heads.

The men were more likely to dress in loud colors than the women; they wore big "cowboy" hats, usually white and nearly always put colorful ribbons or feathers in them. Some of them wore a sort of shirt of calico, made like a coat, with a big ruffled cape at the neck. Their trousers were made of blue broadcloth; sometimes of dressed deerskin. Some wore moccasins, some cowboy style boots; often an Indian would come to church wearing spurs with little bells on them.

This church I am telling you about was Methodist. I remember one of the Choctaw ministers who used to preach there often; his name was Willis Folsom. The Indians held services about the same way everyone does now, with singing and preaching and prayer, except that it was all done in the Choctaw language. They had Sunday school too, with different classes for the different

ages. If they were not having a camp meeting people went home for dinner, then came back for night services.

Camp meetings were held once a month and the Indians and colored people came from miles around to attend. They would come Saturday night and stay until Monday morning, eating all their meals right there on the church grounds and holding three services a day.

They cooked their food there, put it on one long table and all ate together.

Most of the Choctaws in the western part of the Choctaw Nation around McAlester were Baptists. The school district called High Hill is about two miles south of Alderson where their main church was. And when they had camp meetings there, Indians and colored people came from all over the Choctaw Nation. I have attended camp meetings at High Hill many a time, traveling in a wagon with other colored folks clear from Skullyville.

At one camp meeting at High Hill we had at least two hundred present. Of course I didn't count them, but

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there certainly was a big crowd. Indians and colored folks came from Jack Fork, Brazil, Skullyville, Sans Bois and even a few from Tuskahoma. And there was a delegation from out in the Wichita country.

That was after I was grown and had been married the first time; I took my oldest girl with me. She was three then; she is over forty now, so that must have been about 1900 or 1901.

There was a school for Indian girls out in the Wichita country and the Indian agent there thought it would be a good idea for the girls to visit a camp meeting in the Choctaw Nation. They decided to come to High Hill, and the mothers and fathers came along with their daughters, sometimes bringing their whole families.

At that time I was living at Brazil, later to be called Calhoun, north and east and not very far from Skullyville. A crowd of us went to High Hill in a wagon.

There was a good sized church building at High Hill, but this camp meeting I am telling you about was held under a big arbor. Then there were a lot of small

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arbors for people to camp under and there were lots of people present.

Not many of the Wichitas showed up. We called them wild Indians, or the "wild bunch", and they really were pretty uncivilized. There weren't more than thirty or forty of them; I heard that about a hundred planned to come but two thirds of them refused to ride on a train. You see, none of them had ever ridden on a train before.

They held services three times a day; at eleven in the morning, at three in the afternoon, and at night. I don't remember any of the Indians' names except the name of one deacon who seemed to have charge of seeing that the arrangements were all right, that people had plenty to eat and a place to camp. He lived there at High Hill, and his name was Jimmy Nature. Everything went off fine; the Indians were deeply religious, friendly, and very hospitable.

There was plenty to eat for everyone. We cooked mostly on stoves set up under the arbors, but some of the cooking was done on fires. There were cake and pie and almost anything you could think of and we had beef and pork and cornbread and biscuits. One little boy who had come

with the Wichitas wouldn't eat any cake or pie, or drink the coffee; he didn't seem to know how. We had some "Tom Fuller," the old Indian dish made from soaked corn, and I gave the little boy some of that. He "lit" right into it and ate three bowls full.

We had preaching and praying and singing, all in Choctaw, and some of the more important Indians made speeches. One of the Wichitas, an old gray-haired fellow, made a long talk. "We have not come to rob or steal, but to extend you the right hand of fellowship." He was a wild looking figure. He had on leather leggings and moccasins, a calico shirt and a vest, but no trousers. And his hair was long, down to his shoulders.

Monday morning when the Wichitas started to leave everyone shook hands with them, and the Wichita women got hysterical and began to shout and dance. The Choctaws took the Wichitas to McAlester. There they boarded the train for the Reservation.