

COLE, MARY. SECOND INTERVIEW. 12758

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Investigator
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Interview with Mrs. Mary Cole, (colored)
Hartshorne, Oklahoma, Route 1

INDIAN EARLY-DAY SUPERSTITIONS

The Choctaws were a superstitious people; especially so before they took up the white man's religion, although they never altogether lost their peculiar beliefs. I know; I was born among them eighty years ago at a little settlement called Perryville about seven miles or so south of McAlester--before there was any McAlester. My master was a Choctaw, and I talked the Indian tongue before I learned English.

The Choctaws thought that sickness was something like an evil spirit that settled on a person and cursed him. It was something they couldn't understand, for they didn't know anything about germs. Instead of realizing that sickness was a natural result of carelessness, exposure, lack of proper food, contagious germs and the like, the Choctaws thought it was a manifestation of the supernatural and their efforts to cure the sick showed this

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belief and in looking backward I realize that some of their ceremonies were strange, queer, without reason - but deadly serious, because they were doing the best that they knew. The Choctaws had the same faith in their chants and dances to effect a cure that we do in quinine when we give it for malaria.

When our family was freed after the Civil War we moved to the Jack Fork settlement, close to where the post office called Weathers is now. And once when I was ten years old an Indian woman, a neighbor of ours, got sick and her people called in all their friends to try to cure her. The Choctaws gathered at the sick woman's house one night. There was a big crowd of them. They camped in the front yard, cooked and ate supper, and stayed all night. I went over just after dark to see what was going on. An old Indian man went into the house and prayed or said some kind of ceremony over the sick woman. The Choctaws outside built a big fire in the yard and danced around it, singing as they did so. I remember that one woman had terrapin shells with pebbles inside them strapped to her ankles and when she danced the pebbles made a clicking noise.

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There was a pole, taller than a man, stuck up close to the fire, and it had a red ribbon wound around it. An Indian man, whom I heard some of the others call a "Poloma," would jump through the fire while the other Indians were dancing around it. He had some small peeled poles about four feet long in his hand and he kept waving them around. These poles had red ribbons on them tied to the ends. The man would jump through the fire and lay a pole down on the ground, in line with the fire and the house. Then he would jump through the fire again and lay down another pole beyond the first one; and so on, until he had placed all his poles.

Mother, who was with me, told me that they would keep up their ceremonies all night long; in fact they would keep them up - resting between dances, and eating until the patient either got well or died. I remember a lot of such ceremonies, and most of the sick folks would get well, too; though I guess they would have anyway. Maybe the excitement of the singing and dancing took their minds off of their sickness.

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A funny thing happened that night I was telling about at Jack Fork. And it goes to show another of the Indians' queer beliefs. I was just a pickaninny, and I got to wandering around as a child will. I had been around at the back of the house and was coming toward the fire in the front yard to find Mother. I accidentally walked between the fire and the house, and all those Choctaws "took after me", running and yelling. I was scared out of my wits. I ran like a turkey out into the darkness and headed for home. I thought sure I was done for; that the Indians would kill me if I didn't outrun them. And they didn't catch me, either.

They had not meant to hurt me, though. Mother explained about it later. They just wanted to make me retrace my steps between the fire and the house; they thought that by going between the sick person and the dancers I would catch the disease, and maybe cause them bad luck some way.