

COLE, PETE W.

CHOCTAW SCHOOLS.

7833.

Pete W. Cole, Interviewer.  
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Schools and Missions Among the Choctaws.

This article was compiled as the result of interviews with several former students in various schools and missions among the Choctaws.

Several years before the Civil War there were many neighborhood schools throughout the Nations where reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and other graded studies were taught. There were also National academies that took the place of the present high schools. In addition to common school subjects, the advanced students studied natural philosophy, algebra, astronomy, Greek and Latin. In some studies they were taught spelling, and arithmetic and reading in their native language. As a result, practically all of the full bloods could read the Bible, their tribal laws, religious literature, and newspapers, all of which were printed in their native

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language. Above all they are noted for their beautiful handwriting.

In 1841 to 1843 the Choctaw Council appropriated funds for building and maintaining three academies for boys and six schools for girls. One of the academies for boys known as Spencer Academy, remained under the exclusive control of the Choctaw Council for several years. There were several of the students who attended Spencer Academy school at that time who are still living and who still remember the incident that took place in their old school days. There are Abel Belvin, of Boswell, <sup>and</sup> Monroe Ishcommer of near Fort Towson who were interviewed.

In addition to what they were taught in books, they were taught farming. They were taught out of door works at the schools, such as gardening, laundering, wood cutting, and milking.

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The Fort Coffee Academy was one of the schools established in 1842 by the Choctaw Council. This was in one of the buildings that was once the old post of Fort Coffee, and was placed under the direction of the Methodist Church. The girls' department of the school was located at New Hope, which was near Scullyville in what is now Haskell County.

Small orphan boys were generally selected to go to Fort Coffee though some older boys were also among them. At these government schools, upon arrival as pupils, the boys discarded their own clothes consisting of a pair of pants, a hunting shirt, and a handkerchief, twisted into a turban on the head. Their long hair was cut short, and they were presented with a new coat and pants of what is known as Kentucky jeans, shoes, cap, shirt and a cotton handkerchief which was exchanged for a clean wearing apparel every week.

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There was no school on Saturday. The morning was spent in a general clean-up of the grounds and buildings; the afternoon in play with bows and arrows or games of ball. In the evening they went sweeping and fishing. On Sunday, they wore their best clothes and went late Saturday eve. The day was a strict one, being mostly spent in going to church and Sunday school, though much of the time was devoted to singing, which most of the boys enjoyed.

The Choctaw Council passed a law in 1847 authorizing the school trustees of the Choctaw Nation to select and send some of the Choctaw boys to some good college in the United States to obtain a classical education- several took advantage of this opportunity; it was at this time that the work of missionaries took advantage of the condition and with its aid established the governments within the bounds of the

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Territory.

Some of the Foreign Missions (Congregational-Presbyterian) had done active work among the Indians before they moved west and some of the Missionaries came with them to the Indian Territory. There were teachers, physicians, farmers and mechanics who came with the missionaries. One of their chief aims was education, so with the approval of the chiefs, there was appropriated out of their own fund, enough money to maintain a boarding school for the Choctaw and the Chickasaws and no one but educated men and women were required to be appointed as teachers.

One of the earliest missions among the Choctaws in the Indian Territory was Wheelock Academy, established in 1832 by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. The school at Wheelock was given a special appropriation by the Choctaw Council in 1842 and its work was considered a model for the education of girls in Indian Territory, and is still under the

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control of the Indian Office at Muskogee. It is to be noted that the oldest church building in Oklahoma is the Sheelock Church. It was built out of rock or stone construction which dates as far back as 1846 under the supervision of Reverend Alfred Wright, who was a graduate of Williams College, Massachusetts, and Andover Theological Seminary.

Mr. Wright <sup>was</sup> assisted by Reverend Cyrus Byington, another missionary to the Choctaws, <sup>and they</sup> were the first persons in translating and publishing a hymn book and spelling book for the Choctaws before their removal from Mississippi to this country. This book was written in their own native tongue.

It was largely to the results of the work of the temperance societies that the drinking of whiskey was considered disreputable when both the vital and Federal laws passed laws to prohibit and introduction of sale of liquor in the Indian Territory.