

**Strangers in Their Own Land:  
The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians**  
Della Hébert

2013 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies  
Advisor: Professor Charles Hughes

The Choctaw reservation in the small town of Henning, TN located in Lauderdale County is one of numerous Choctaw communities throughout the South. Choctaw are the third largest Native American tribe in the United States and there are federally recognized and non-recognized bands in Alabama, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas.<sup>1</sup> The majority of Choctaw, over 200,000, belong to the Choctaw Nation.<sup>2</sup> The Henning reservation is a part of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians reservation, which has almost 10,000 members.<sup>3</sup> The Mississippi Band comprises the descendants of the Choctaw that remained in the Choctaw tribal lands in Mississippi after removal when the large majority of the Choctaw tribe departed to the west. As of December 2012, the reservation in Henning became the ninth and most recent addition to the Mississippi Band's eight reservations. The history of the small community of Choctaw in west Tennessee represents an example of some important aspects of the Mississippi Band's past, including sharecropping, churches, education, and the continuation of Choctaw traditions. They are significant to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' past because they were integral to the Choctaw's struggle for livelihood and independence as a third identity in the Deep South.

---

<sup>1</sup> "2010 Census Table on Reported Tribes," U.S. Census Bureau, United States Census 2010, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choctaw#cite\\_note-117](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choctaw#cite_note-117).

<sup>2</sup> "2011 Oklahoma Indian Nations Pocket Pictorial Collection Directory," Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> "History," Mississippi Band Of Choctaw Indians, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.choctaw.org/aboutMBCI/history/index.html>.



Photo: “American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States Wall Maps,” edited by me to include to Henning Reservation, U.S. Census Bureau, United States Census 2010.

According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Congress has passed more Federal laws affecting Native Americans than any other group of people in the United States during the past two centuries.<sup>4</sup> For the large part of the United State’s history, white men have been the creators of such laws and their decisions have had deep and long-lasting impact upon the lives of American Indians. These laws were often the culmination of a lack of effort or desire to understand Native American culture or ideology in favor of the dominance of the American way. The most harmful law, literally causing the deaths of thousands of Indians, was undoubtedly Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830. Adding to the list though, the

<sup>4</sup> “Budget Justifications and Performance Information Fiscal Year 2014: Indian Affairs,” The United States Department of the Interior.

General Allotment Act of 1887, the Curtis Act of 1898, and the Termination Era from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s all had harmful consequences for tribes and native people as well.

For the Choctaw that remained in Mississippi after the Indian Removal act passed, they endured through the majority of these policies in addition to being denied their right to land in Mississippi under the article fourteen in the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek of 1830, which secured their removal during the Indian removal era. Article fourteen of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek promised Choctaw that wanted to stay in Mississippi rather than relocating allotments of land and dual citizenship as Choctaws and Mississippians. The government quickly dispossessed them however and they were forced to live like vagrants, wandering Mississippi in search of safe places to create communities amidst extreme hostility from whites. The Mississippi Choctaw existed only in a marginalized role in the racially segregated South. They were very poor and had little access to education and jobs until the later half of the twentieth century. For some Choctaw in the Mississippi Band in Henning, the government assistance that the tribe receives is small, but significant reparation for the suffering that the Mississippi Choctaw endured during Indian policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The Mississippi Choctaw's culture has been heavily shaped by their experiences in Mississippi after removal. The core aspects that comprise their identity have survived to the twenty-first century, but with modifications over the years. As a brief overview, parts of the Choctaw culture that originate to the pre-removal era, which continue today include their language, dancing, basket weaving, bead work, traditional clothing, stickball, chunky, social gatherings, the tribal council, burial customs, traditional medicine, prophecy, storytelling, marriage customs, and spiritual beliefs. In contrast to the traditional aspects of Choctaw culture that continue, the Mississippi Choctaw are predominantly Christian and lead contemporary

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Cubert Bell Sr., June 26, 2013; Interview with the Bell family and with Gwen Langford, April 13, 2013.

American-style lives. The most distinct cultural changes for the Choctaw in the Mississippi Band resulted from the effort to survive once the government dispossessed them of their rights and they had to make sense of life in Mississippi, which was quickly changing to the point where there was no room for a third identity within the black and white terms of the Deep South.

The Choctaw navigated to the best of their ability the confusing and changing world that was rapidly appearing around them. After they were driven from their villages, they formed isolated, hidden communities in order to avoid further encounters with whites and avoid removal efforts. When the American Civil War ended, they took a chance to improve their lives and adopted sharecropping and later Christianity. On numerous occasions, they came forward from their hidden communities in an effort to secure their rights under the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Regardless of their demands, the government continued to relocate them to the Choctaw Territory to the west, which culminated in the event known amongst the Mississippi Band as “the Second Removal” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>6</sup> The Choctaw persisted though and 1,253 remained in Mississippi by 1910.<sup>7</sup> The government aided them after nearly eighty-five years of relocation efforts in 1917. In 1918, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established a Choctaw Agency in Philadelphia, MS, to help the Choctaw. The agency, despite its perhaps good intentions, believed that the Choctaw were incapable of managing their own affairs or reservation and during the 1940s and 50s controlled the newly established tribal council.<sup>8</sup> The reservation as a result suffered and many Choctaw moved away, including those that moved to Lauderdale County in the 1950s. Despite all of the hardships, the Choctaw continue to endure. Before I discuss the people that moved to Lauderdale, I will describe how

---

<sup>6</sup> Estelline Tubby, in “The Paradox of Traditionalization: Negotiating the Past in Choctaw Prophetic Discourse,” by Tom Mould, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 42 (2005): 280.

<sup>7</sup> 1910 U.S. Census Data, analyzed by Clara Sue Kidwell, in “The Choctaw Struggle for Land and Identity in Mississippi: 1830-1918,” in *After Removal*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Martin, *Chief: The Autobiography of Chief Phillip Martin, Longtime Tribal Leader, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians*, ed. by Lynne Jeter et al., (Brandon: Quail Ridge Press, 2009), 93-113.

the Choctaw survived in the Deep South, where race held strong social, economic, and political implications, in order to better understand the identity of the Choctaw.

---

As settlers poured into the western United States during the period of Manifest Destiny, when Americans felt that it was their divine responsibility to cultivate the wild, American frontier, they came into increasing conflict with the Native Americans that already inhabited the region. The controversial 1830 Indian Removal Act under President Jackson forced the Five Civilized Tribes (the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminoles) to relocate to the west in the so-called Indian Territory. Jackson secured the first of the Five Civilized Tribes removal, the Choctaw, with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in September of 1830. The leaders that eventually signed the treaty were divided over the idea of removal. Some agreed with the United States that the Choctaw would not be able to survive amidst the growing American population unless they relocated, whereas others refused to part with their land as it was unthinkable to desert the bones of their ancestors and a violation of the natural order to leave the land that the Choctaw believed they were literally born from.<sup>9</sup> To overcome the resistance, the United States delegates threatened that Andrew Jackson would march the army into Choctaw hunting grounds unless the leaders signed the treaty.<sup>10</sup> With this, the Choctaw ceded their last remaining land, about ten million acres in the core of the state of Mississippi.

The impending relocation caused devastation amongst the tribe, who had trusted the United States and even fought for them in the War of 1812.<sup>11</sup> Leaving the land they were given

---

<sup>9</sup> Donna L. Akers, "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 23:3 (1997): 63-70.

<sup>10</sup> Donna L. Akers, *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Akers, "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective," 63-70.

by the “Great Spirit” and the “Great Mother” was equivalent to death in the Choctaw’s minds.<sup>12</sup> They begged agents to understand that they could not be uprooted and forced to live in a new land.<sup>13</sup> Their suffering and pleas failed to move the government, and in the fall of 1831 the first group of Choctaw began what later became known as the Trail of Tears. So many died on the journey and once they arrived, that an estimated 5,000-6,000 Choctaw remained in Mississippi and refused to leave, even in the face of incarceration and fines.<sup>14</sup>

According to historian of Native American studies Ronald N. Satz, the Choctaw that remained in Mississippi after 1833 became the “victims of one of the most flagrant cases of fraud, intimidation, and speculation in American history.”<sup>15</sup> This fate was consequence of the fact that Choctaw were considered a useless and burdensome population to the state. They did not contribute to the main economy whatsoever because the only jobs possibly available to them related to farming and they refused to be associated with the status of slaves.<sup>16</sup> In the state that had one of the largest cotton economies in the world, this made the Choctaw worthless in the minds of white farmers, who demanded that politicians to secure their removal. When the federal government failed to effectively do so, farmers unlawfully evicted the Choctaw instead. Speculators took advantage of the Choctaw’s precarious situation as an unwanted group and used fraudulent legal means to take their remaining lands in exchange for nothing in return except more hardship. The years following the 1833 when the last group of Choctaw left on the

---

<sup>12</sup> Mingo Pushmataha, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs, II*, (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1832–1861), 230, in “Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective” by Donna L. Akers, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 23:3 (1997): 69.

<sup>13</sup> Akers, “Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People,” 68.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Knispel, “From The Trail of Tears to Today: The Choctaw Journey in Mississippi,” *Mississippi Public Broadcasting: News*, February 14, 2011; Ronald Satz, “The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency,” in *After Removal*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald N. Satz, “The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency,” in *After Removal*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Kidwell, “The Choctaw Struggle for Land and Identity in Mississippi: 1830-1918,” 68.

Trail of Tears branded the remaining Choctaw as a worthless, uneducated, uncivilized, un-Christian, and very much so unwanted population.

For the Choctaw that remained though, they continued to try and negotiate with white officials as they had done in the past, naively believing that their rights under article fourteen would be honored despite having been symbolically betrayed by Andrew Jackson and his treaty just a few years before. Their land held that much importance to the Choctaw, and they desperately wanted to remain. In order to avoid removal, the Choctaw tried to resort to their rights under article fourteen in the treaty, which stipulated that:

Each Choctaw head of family, being desirous to remain, and become a citizen of the States, shall be permitted to do so, by signifying his intention to the agent within six months from the ratification of this treaty, and he or she shall thereupon be entitled to a reservation of one section of six hundred and forty acres of land... If they reside upon said lands intending to become citizens of the States, for five years after the ratification of this treaty, in that case, a grant of land in fee simple shall be issued... Persons who claim under this article shall not lose the privileges of a Choctaw citizen, but if they ever remove [to Indian Country] are not entitled to any portion of the annuity.<sup>17</sup>

The honest and straightforward nature of article fourteen was deceptive though. William Ward, the federal agent assigned to collecting the names of claimants thwarted the Choctaw by physically destroying their claims, removing names from his register, and encouraging removal agents to whip any Indian that refused to emigrate.<sup>18</sup> As Ward refused to allow the Choctaw to submit their claims, the Choctaw slowly became landless. Squatters and land speculators unlawfully took land in the ceded Choctaw territory and the government sold the remaining land to settlers, all before the final submission of article fourteen claimants.<sup>19</sup> The final register that Ward submitted to President Jackson in 1833 consisted of only sixty-nine names, which was a

---

<sup>17</sup> Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, September 27, 1830, reprinted in *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* by Jesse McKee and Jon A. Schlenker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980), 200.

<sup>18</sup> Satz, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Satz, 9-11.

small number in comparison to the hundreds of Choctaw that tried to submit claims.<sup>20</sup> The Choctaw leaders in response to Ward's hostility and the failure of the United States to uphold their promise sent a memorial to Congress protesting that their ceded lands were being sold before they received their rights under article fourteen.<sup>21</sup> Rather than doing anything to actually resolve the issue, President Jackson on his last day in office recommended that a commission be formed for the purpose of investigating all outstanding claims.<sup>22</sup>

Over the next seventy years, the majority of Choctaw that remained in Mississippi were unable to experience the benefits of land or citizenship in Mississippi because they were dispossessed and disenfranchised.<sup>23</sup> The Mississippi Constitutions of 1868 and 1890 included them as "not taxed" citizens of the state within the same category as "idiots and insane persons."<sup>24</sup> The Choctaw commission that was eventually established in 1838 and revived in 1842 by Congress was ineffective in granting the majority of Choctaw claimants their land.<sup>25</sup> The commission's period of operation was always short-lived and consequently, very few of the Choctaw's claims were reviewed.<sup>26</sup> The commission in an effort to grant claims in light of the fact that nearly all the ceded Choctaw territory had already been sold, gave the Choctaw scrip in lieu of land that they could redeem for money and land in Indian Territory with their brethren.<sup>27</sup>

The Choctaw that were forced from their homelands by squatters, speculators, and settlers ironically practiced a lifestyle similar to the white farmsteads that appeared all over

---

<sup>20</sup> Satz, 9; Kidwell, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Kidwell, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Satz, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Satz, 19.

<sup>24</sup> An excerpt from *The Federal and State Constitutions*, in "The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency," by Ronald N. Satz, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Kidwell, 68-72.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Satz, 11.



Mississippi.<sup>28</sup> Following the collapse of their main source of revenue, which was the fur industry, the Choctaw lifestyle became more reliant on farming.<sup>29</sup> Scattered across the state in villages, families lived in log or frame houses, practiced agriculture, raised livestock, hunted, and gathered edible plants.<sup>30</sup> Their homes were loosely grouped together to allow extended family to remain close by in accordance with their cultural reliance on kinship units.<sup>31</sup> Families used contemporary farming equipment such as harnesses and plows in addition to owning guns, English ceramics, iron knives, and utensils.<sup>32</sup> Choctaw continued to make traditional items like ceramic vessels, shell beads, stone tools, and bows and arrows, but with less frequency as mass-produced American or English items became available to them.<sup>33</sup> The most distinguishing characteristic between the Choctaw homesteads and white ones was that few Choctaw were Christian. The missionaries that had arrived in their territory before 1830 were moderately successful in converting some Choctaw, but those members left with the rest of tribe to the west.<sup>34</sup> Hence, this contributed to the justification in white's minds to push the unchristian and barbarian Choctaw out of their homes and villages.

From 1830 to the 1880s, whites eager to transform Mississippi into farms and cotton plantations harassed the Choctaw until virtually all of their Indian towns that existed before 1830 were abandoned.<sup>35</sup> One description from a wealthy Mississippi farmer in his book *Mississippi Scenes* demonstrates the white farmer's disgust for the Choctaw:

---

<sup>28</sup> Rufus Ward, "Choctaw Farmsteads in Mississippi, 1830," in *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>29</sup> Akers, "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People," 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ward, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Kidwell, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Ward, 33-36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kidwell, 83.

<sup>35</sup> Satz, 14.

I do not know a Negro that would countenance an exchange of situations with a Choctaw... as a general thing, these [Choctaw] are hardly above animals.<sup>36</sup>

On the receiving end of this hatred were Choctaw families, who had to flee from their homes in order to escape dangerous encounters with the whites. A leader of one Choctaw community recounted the degree to which his community suffered at the hands of white men in 1849:

We have had habitations torn down and burned; our fences destroyed, cattle turned up in our fields and we ourselves have been scourged, manacled, fettered, and otherwise personally abused.<sup>37</sup>

With little physical space in Mississippi available for the Choctaw to live, many receded into the last remaining wildernesses. Current tribal member Wilma Simpson recalled of her ancestors:

The ones who remained here, they hid. They hid in the woods, the hid in the swamp area. And they had every intention to remain here. To show that nobody could never remove them.<sup>38</sup>

Simpson's quote demonstrates how the Choctaw, fearful of hostile settlers and farmers, but determined to remain in their beloved homelands, scattered wherever the land was least desirable to farmers into unwanted swamplands and heavily forested hill country. Although their communities were smaller than their old villages, they continued to depend of kinship groups and practice their traditional lifestyle.<sup>39</sup> The small communities were primarily located in the east central part of the state near the location of the mound of *Nanah Waiya*, which they considered to be the physical manifestation of the "Great Mother" and the place from whence

---

<sup>36</sup> Joseph B. Cobb, *Mississippi Scenes; or Sketches of Southern and Western Life and Adventure, Humorous, Satirical, and Descriptive, Including the Legend of Black Creek*, (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1851), 177-78.

<sup>37</sup> Petition of One Hundred Red Men, December 6, 1849, ROIA, LR, Choctaw Emigration, RG 75, NA; Peterson, "The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians," 25-27, in "The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency," by Ronald N. Satz, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Wilma Simpson in "From The Trail of Tears to Today: The Choctaw Journey in Mississippi" by Sandra Knispel, *Mississippi Public Broadcasting: News*, February 14, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Akers, "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People," 73.

the Choctaw were born.<sup>40</sup> Life was hard and many times Choctaw were hungry with no money. The red clay hills that they inhabited were of poor quality for growing crops.<sup>41</sup> Women sometimes traded whites their traditional swamp cane baskets for food, but for the most part there was no way for the Choctaw to consistently sustain themselves without becoming cotton pickers alongside blacks, which they were determined to avoid.<sup>42</sup> Observers in the 1840s recalled that the Indians were “gleaning a precarious subsistence, and enduring too often in this land of abundance, the pangs of hunger.”<sup>43</sup> Choctaw commissioner, John F. H. Claiborne reported, “All classes and sexes are habitually intemperate, ready to barter any chattel in their possession for whiskey.”<sup>44</sup> Claiborne, who did not sympathize for the Choctaw, nonetheless provided a glimpse into the lives of the Choctaw that had been cheated their land and the degree of destituteness that some lived in.

After the American Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, the Choctaw took the opportunity to enter the workforce as sharecroppers and lumbermen, who cut and pulled logs for the pulpwood industry.<sup>45</sup> As black freedmen emigrated from the sandy clay hill country for more fertile lands, the resulting labor shortage encouraged farmers to recruit Choctaw as workers.<sup>46</sup> By this time, the farmers were aware that the Choctaw were a separate and distinct

---

<sup>40</sup> Special Agent Douglas Cooper’s 1853 census of the Choctaws remaining in Mississippi in “The ‘Identified Full-Bloods’ in Mississippi: Race and Choctaw Identity, 1898-1918,” by Katherine M. B. Osburn, in *Ethnohistory* 56 (2009): 423-447.

<sup>41</sup> Osburn, 423-447.

<sup>42</sup> Rufus Ward, “Ask Rufus: Baskets hold story of early Choctaw,” *The Dispatch*, November 17, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Eaton to Ward, November 13, 1830, 23<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., S. Doc. 512, 2:42-43, in “The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency,” by Ronald N. Satz, in *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>44</sup> John F. H. Claiborne, *Memorial*, 28<sup>th</sup> Congr., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., February 19, 1844, H. Doc. 137, 1-2,5 in “Choctaw Land and Identity 1830-1919” by Clara Sue Kidwell in *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Kidwell, 81-82

<sup>46</sup> Charles Roberts, “The Second Removal, 1903,” in *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 95.

community.<sup>47</sup> Choctaw, who fervently maintain their identity and separateness from blacks, accepted the job offers and most became sharecroppers while working during the off-season in the pulpwood industry.<sup>48</sup> Jobs transformed the quality of life for Choctaw from living in abject poverty to having a regular meal on the table even if it meant living in constant debt to white farmers.<sup>49</sup> As sharecroppers, they no longer faced the possibility of being pushed out of their homelands by the local population. Sharecropping provided Choctaw with a sense of livelihood and security; they could continue practicing their culture and remain largely separate from the surrounding community, but without the threat of harm.

The Choctaw sharecropping communities experienced more security with the emergence of Indian churches. After a community attended a black Baptist church near Carthage, MS they requested the Mississippi Baptist Association to establish an Indian missionary for their community.<sup>50</sup> The fact that they attended the church on their own free will demonstrates that their culture was changing as a result of more interaction with white culture. It is likely that they were motivated to establish their own church in order to remain distinct from blacks and the Jim Crow laws that applied to them in order to further the sense of security that their communities had experienced. In 1880, the Choctaw-Chickasaw Baptist Association along with the Oklahoma Baptist Association sent Peter Folsom, a zealous seventy-year-old Oklahoma Choctaw and the first ordained Choctaw Baptist priest, after he learned that “among the 2,000 Choctaw that remained in Mississippi there was not one professing Christian” in Mississippi.<sup>51</sup> Folsom inspired visits from Oklahoma Choctaw to the Mississippi Choctaw communities and a

---

<sup>47</sup> Osburn, 423-447.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Kidwell, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Kidwell, 83.

<sup>51</sup> “Minutes Choctaw-Chickasaw Baptist Association, 1880,” 8; “Minutes Choctaw-Chickasaw Baptist Association, 1879,” 9, in “The Bashful Baptist Who Waxed Bold In the Lord,” GospelFuel.

Mississippi Choctaw Ministry to form.<sup>52</sup> By 1892, there were nine Choctaw Baptist churches in Mississippi with a combined membership of 332, which was a relatively small percentage of the total population.<sup>53</sup> These churches were successful in their communities because the Choctaw ministers and the community wielded complete control over them.<sup>54</sup> The autonomy allowed the flexibility that Choctaw ministers needed in order to present Christianity in a meaningful way to their Choctaw congregants.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the Baptists churches, the Catholic Holy Rosary Indian Mission had an enormous impact on the Choctaw communities. Located in the Tucker community, The Holy Rosary Indian Mission relied heavily upon the devotion of its Choctaw members. After its establishment in 1883 by a visiting Catholic Bishop from Natchez, MS, Father Bekker, the church's priest, invited Tucker's Choctaw families to work as famers on the church's land and live in their log homes in exchange for constructing the Church and donating one-fifth of their produce to help cover the Church's expenses.<sup>56</sup> A handful of families agreed to the offer, which essentially stipulated that the Choctaw would be still be as sharecroppers.<sup>57</sup> In comparison to the system of peonage that sharecropping induced amongst the majority of sharecroppers though, the independence that the church's sharecropping positions offered was life changing. By 1887, the mission had almost 2,000 acres of land that the Choctaw were able to cultivate.<sup>58</sup> By 1890, the mission had a membership of 690 Choctaw, which was roughly a third of the population at the time.<sup>59</sup> The Choctaw that lived on the church land were able to keep the majority of their profits at the end of the harvest. When the first school was built in Tucker in 1884 by the

---

<sup>52</sup> Kidwell, 83.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Kidwell, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Sister John Christopher Langford, M.S.B.T., "Holy Rosary Indian Mission: The Mississippi Choctaw and the Catholic Church," in *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 113.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Roberts, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

mission, the Choctaw, who have always had an interest in educating their children since the time when the first missionaries arrived in the early 1800s, gladly sent their children.<sup>60</sup> Although attendance was initially low because the children were needed to help in the fields, it grew quickly after the cotton season was over.<sup>61</sup> The teacher, Henry Halbert, even learned Choctaw in order to teach his pupils and later requested funds from the government to create schools in the other communities as well.<sup>62</sup> Between 1891-1899, teachers, who “praised the intelligence and quickness of their pupils,” operated seven schools throughout the Choctaw communities.<sup>63</sup> The churches and schools provided the Choctaw communities with a stronger sense of stability and identity. Families gathered at churches and schools to reconnect with their neighbors and discuss problems. They provided communities with a place to gather during lapses in work and a place where they could be Choctaw within the structure of the segregated South. Outside of churches and schools, they ate meals together and played traditional Choctaw sports like stickball or chunky.<sup>64</sup> They continued to speak Choctaw and wear their traditional clothing as well.

The improvements to the Choctaw communities experienced a major setback in the 1890s under the Indian Allotment Act, more commonly known as the Dawes Act of 1887. The act originally had no jurisdiction over the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma, but was modified to include them when Congress created the Special Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes in 1893, commonly known as the Dawes commission.<sup>65</sup> In order to help the land allotments be distributed and officially include Indian Country under the Dawes Act, the Curtis Act was passed in 1898 and required that all Indians who wanted land be added to the official registers do so before the rolls closed in 1907. The Dawes Act’s ultimate goals included termination of

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Kidwell, 84.

<sup>63</sup> Kidwell, 85; Henry Sales Halbert, “The Mississippi Choctaws,” in *Biennial Report...for Scholastic Years 1897-98 and 1898-99* (Jacksonville, Fla. : Lance, 1900), 35.

<sup>64</sup> Langford, 115.

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, 97.

tribal sovereignty, tribal governance, and forcing Indians to adopt white lifestyles. Despite their improved social standing in Mississippi, the federal government in accordance with the Dawes and Curtis acts enforced the relocation policy and allotment of land in Indian Territory for the Mississippi Choctaw. The government became especially devoted to their relocation in the 1900s after learning that speculators were profiting from removing Choctaw to Indian Territory and that many had died from the lack of adequate care.<sup>66</sup> Congress assigned \$20,000 to the Dawes commission in 1903 to remove all indigent Choctaw in Mississippi.<sup>67</sup> The Choctaw like before were reluctant to leave their homes. As evidenced by numerous letters to the commissioner in charge, H. Van V. Smith, many did not want to abandon their jobs, fail to harvest their crops, or leave outstanding debts unpaid.<sup>68</sup> Some of the more educated Choctaw petitioned Congress in 1900 asking that they be permitted to listed as part of the Choctaw Nation without relocating, citing their de facto membership in the newly organized Choctaw Nation under article fourteen, which stated that “Persons who claim under this article shall not lose the privileges of a Choctaw citizen.”<sup>69</sup> The government however had already interpreted the article in 1897 to mean that only Choctaw who relocated to the Indian Territory would be considered members of the tribe.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, about half of the population of roughly 3,000 was removed between 1900 and 1910; the state funding to the Choctaw schools was eliminated and

---

<sup>66</sup> Roberts, 98.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Smith to the Reverend Jim Wallace, Smith to Gill Simpson, Smith to Wilson Isom, Smith to James Ames, Smith to Martha Jasper, Smith to Willie Solomon, Smith to John William, Smith to Jim Haney, and Smith to Hudson Lewis, all dated August 3, 1903, Letters Sent by Special Agent Smith, Ledgers 1 and 2, RG 75, FARC, Forth Worth, Entry 168, in “The Second Removal, 1903,” by Charles Roberts, 100-101.

<sup>69</sup> Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek; Osburn, 423-447.

<sup>70</sup> “Report to the Five Civilized Tribe Upon the Question, Whether the Mississippi Choctaws are Not Entitled to All the Rights of Choctaw Citizenship Except an Interest in the Annuities, Requited by Act of Congress, Approved June 7, 1897.” Exhibit 2 in House Document No. 426, in “The ‘Identified Full-Bloods’ in Mississippi: Race and Choctaw Identity, 1898-1918,” by Katherine M. B. Osburn, 423-447.

the schools eventually closed; and most of the Baptist churches closed as well as their congregations diminished.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these huge setbacks though, some Choctaw remained steadfast in their refusal to leave. More traditional communities like Pearl River and Bogue Chitto evaded field agents and censuses, while others continued to insist that they were eligible for membership without relocation.<sup>72</sup> After the Choctaw Nation membership register officially closed in 1907 and the removal effort had ended, a few Choctaw leaders continued try and improve their communities. Mississippi Choctaw entered a political battle with the Choctaw Nation and Oklahoma to reopen the rolls and permit Choctaw membership without relocation.<sup>73</sup> They also fought to distinguish their right to membership in the Choctaw Nation from fraudulent groups in the lower Mississippi area.<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately for the Mississippi Choctaw, the Choctaw Nation and Oklahoma successfully denied reopening the register.<sup>75</sup> Although, the Choctaw failed legally their efforts nonetheless had a positive impact of the community when a congressional investigation team arrived in 1917 after hearing about the Choctaw's dispossession and poor living conditions.<sup>76</sup> In 1918, the federal government finally acknowledged the Mississippi Choctaw's determination to stay in their homelands after almost eighty-five years of trying to remove them. Cato Sells, the commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time said:

It is apparent that the Oklahoma rolls have been finally closed against the Mississippi Choctaws, and that their future is in Mississippi, where everything considered, I am persuaded that these deserving people should receive kind, prompt, and substantial consideration from the government.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> 1910 U.S. Census Data, analyzed by Clara Sue Kidwell, in "The Choctaw Struggle for Land and Identity in Mississippi: 1830-1918," 87.

<sup>72</sup> Osburn, 423-447.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Satz, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Cato Sells, *Report for 1918* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 83-84, in "The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency," by Ronald N. Satz, 23.



Following this, Sells established the Choctaw Indian Agency near the Choctaw communities at Philadelphia, MS, and secured \$75,000 from the government to assist the Choctaw.<sup>78</sup> The funds helped establish an Indian hospital in 1926, elementary schools in all of the seven communities by 1930, and houses for Choctaw that previously had lived poorly ventilated, small cabins as sharecroppers.<sup>79</sup> For a long time though, this was basically the only development that the Choctaw agency provided.

The fact that Choctaw entered the jobs market, converted to Christianity, sent their children to white schools, and were politically savvy demonstrates that when they saw an opportunity to improve their lives, they took it, even if it meant shifting their cultural identity to accommodate a white way of life. The Mississippi Choctaw played an active role to raise the standard of life for their people, a battle that lasted for almost eighty-five years and required adaptability. Their perseverance brought the community through difficult times and eventually secured the funds that helped to establish the Choctaw reservation in 1944 and official federal recognition as The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians in 1945 when the tribe adopted its constitution and bylaws.<sup>80</sup>

Hard times continued to afflict the Choctaw during the 1940s and 1950s however. The Choctaw agency had several superintendents that failed to fully address the needs of the community from the late 1940s-1950s.<sup>81</sup> This was a period known as the termination era in Indian policy. After WWII, the federal government sought to eliminate its relationship with Native American tribes, cut funding, encouraged rapid assimilation, and terminated over hundred

---

<sup>78</sup> Jesse O. McKee and Steve Murray, "Economic Progress and Development of the Choctaw since 1945," in *After Removal*, ed. by Samuel J. Wells et al. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986), 122.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*; Satz, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Satz, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, 93-113.

tribe's sovereignty.<sup>82</sup> The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' newly acquired sovereignty fortunately was never terminated. However, the government relocation programs did encourage Choctaw to leave the reservation and assimilate into white cities by attending training centers all over the country.<sup>83</sup> As a result, there was little effort on the part of the Choctaw agency to create more jobs on the reservation, which many Choctaw families there desperately needed.<sup>84</sup> Only a small percentage of the Choctaw population worked on the reservation and they were employed by the agency in low-skilled positions as cooks, bus drivers, nurse's aids, sanitation workers, and janitors.<sup>85</sup>

In order to support their families, many Choctaw simply had to move off of the reservation away from the communities that they grew up in.<sup>86</sup> Sharecropping was common lifestyle amongst the Mississippi Choctaw during the early and mid-nineteenth century as evidenced by the network that Choctaw Kinsmen would relay to one another about "good land and good men"<sup>87</sup> Many Choctaw today, who are in their sixties or seventies, can recall working for white overseers on farms during the 1940s-50s. One Choctaw member of the tribe said "A lot of Choctaw were sharecroppers and my family was one of them, where we had to go out to the field and chop cotton or corn."<sup>88</sup> Another one recalled that "When the sun's up, they [the white people] expecting us to be in the field."<sup>89</sup> According to testimonies from Choctaw sharecroppers in the late 1960s, they often moved after fulfilling their contracts with white farmers, which suggests that they no longer were held in a state of peonage as they had been

---

<sup>82</sup> "Termination Era 1950s, Public Law 280," Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes.

<sup>83</sup> Martin, 93-113; Ben Keck, "Growing up Choctaw: Sally Wells Celebrates Heritage at Pow Wow," *The Murfreesboro Post*, October 10, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Martin, 93-113.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>87</sup> Monte Ray Kenaston, "Sharecropping, Solidarity, and Social Cleavage: The Genesis of a Choctaw Sub-Community in Tennessee," (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1972), 45.

<sup>88</sup> "Voices of Choctaw Indians," EchoSpaceDotOrg, video, minute 1:19.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, minute 1:30.

when they first began sharecropping in the late nineteenth century.<sup>90</sup> Choctaw men could choose to leave at the end of the season after paying his debts for a number of reasons, like if he did not like the farmer or if there was a better position elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> Although the Choctaw agency essentially prevented the Choctaw communities on the reservation from growing successful, Choctaw men could still move away and make a better situation for their families elsewhere.

---

### **From Mississippi to Gold Dust, TN (Before the Henning Reservation)**

Gold Dust in the 1950s was a predominantly agricultural town. It sustained huge cotton yields that were shipped down the Mississippi River or in trucks into Memphis to be sold.<sup>92</sup> Poorer families tended to live there and it had a reputation for being dangerous. Gold Dust was located in an area known as the “the bottoms,” where “bootleg whiskey is produced,” where “crap games go on on tavern floors,” where “there are beer joints that never close,” and “where people are murdered.”<sup>93</sup> In contrast, the higher land towards the east where the cities were located was known as “the hills.”<sup>94</sup> “The bottoms” is also an appropriate name for the Gold Dust region because when the Mississippi river floods, Gold Dust becomes inundated with water.<sup>95</sup> The farmers that hired Choctaw to work for them in Gold Dust had always recruited families each year to work, whether this meant finding labor in other states or from nearby farms.<sup>96</sup> This system of short-term contracts helped to ensure that the sharecroppers would be paid as little as

---

<sup>90</sup> Kenaston, 45.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>92</sup> Irene Yochum Chipman, *Gold Dust Tennessee*, (Unknown publisher, 1987), 1-139. I read this short book at the Lauderdale Public Library and unfortunately did not write down the publishing information or page numbers.

<sup>93</sup> Kenaston, 13.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

the farmer wanted to offer.<sup>97</sup> In the past, the farmers in Gold Dust recruited black, whites, and Mexican-American families.<sup>98</sup>

The history of the Choctaw that moved to Lauderdale County, in west Tennessee begins around the end of winter in 1952 when a farmer from Gold Dust, Tennessee on a labor recruitment expedition arrived in Philadelphia, Mississippi, befriended a Choctaw named Abel Anderson, and asked him to work as a sharecropper on his land for the upcoming cotton season.<sup>99</sup> Anderson accepted and his, plus three other families, relocated to Gold Dust in Lauderdale County just as the springtime started.<sup>100</sup> When the Choctaw moved in 1952, landlords observed that they brought only enough furnishing for a bare room, some kitchen utensils, and several outfits.<sup>101</sup> Two of the families returned to Mississippi once the cotton season was over, and returned to Gold Dust for the following season after spreading the word to other families of the good jobs available in Tennessee.<sup>102</sup> The sharecropping system that many Choctaw depended on in the hill country of Mississippi was languishing as a result of mechanical farming methods that required fewer workers, whereas Gold Dust continued to rely heavily on sharecroppers.<sup>103</sup> Unemployment was very high on the reservation and families could not resist the higher profitability of Gold Dust's rich alluvial deposits in contrast to the red clay hill-country of Mississippi.<sup>104</sup> Consequently by 1960, there were about 200 Choctaw in the Gold Dust area.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 23.

When the Choctaw first moved to Gold Dust, there was initially some discrimination from the white community. Gold Dust was segregated into white and black and the majority was white; stereotypes about Indians and Cowboys were undoubtedly the only source of knowledge about the town's new Choctaw families.<sup>106</sup> Like in Mississippi, the inhabitants in Gold Dust were confused by the presence of a realistic third identity in their community. The Choctaw women's traditional dresses, their poor grasp of the English language, and their unique customs gave whites the impression that they were "sort of backward."<sup>107</sup> Some whites also disliked that Choctaw men could associate with blacks on a casual level at beer-joints or in baseball games and then enter whites-only businesses or attend a whites-only church.<sup>108</sup> The white Baptist church that the Choctaw initially attended provides an example of the prejudice. The white missionary that created the Baptist Church in Gold Dust learned that their were Baptist Choctaw in the vicinity and invited them to attend service.<sup>109</sup> Even though only about five Choctaw families attended the church, knowledge that other Choctaw frequently were being arrested after getting drunk at black-owned bars tarnished the Choctaw's reputation.<sup>110</sup> Regardless of the fact that the Baptist Choctaw families did not tolerate drinking, some white members of the congregation told them that they were "dirty" and that they "associated with Negroes."<sup>111</sup> Life for the Baptists Choctaw only improved once they attended their own segregated Indian church, which reaffirmed the rightful system of segregation in the whites congregant's minds.<sup>112</sup>

The Choctaw that left the white church because they felt so unwelcome built their own Baptist church in 1961.<sup>113</sup> Like in the 1880s when the Baptist churches first became popular amongst the Choctaw in Mississippi, the local Choctaw requested that the nearby Baptist

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 119-120.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

association send word to Oklahoma to deliver them an Indian missionary. In 1960, a Choctaw-speaking Choctaw missionary arrived and became the newly built church's spiritual leader. Although the church served only the Choctaw community, white Baptist members of the community still heavily supported it, demonstrating that not all of the Baptist congregation was unfriendly towards the Choctaw or wanted them to leave them the church completely.<sup>114</sup> In fact, on more than one occasion the Baptist association paid for Indian youths to attend a Baptist Boarding School in the eastern part of Tennessee.<sup>115</sup> Cubert Bell Sr., a resident of the Choctaw reservation in Henning, was relieved when he was sent to a Baptist Academy in eastern Tennessee after his freshmen year of high school at nearby Ripley High because it got him out of working in the cotton field.<sup>116</sup> "I stayed there for three years, didn't come home, because if I came home I knew where I'd be, working in the cotton fields" said Bell.<sup>117</sup>

Overall though, most whites in the community accepted the Choctaw as a distinct third identity that was permitted to use white facilities within the segregated system.<sup>118</sup> There were still some whites-only businesses that would not accept Choctaw, including some beer-joints and the barbershop, but the rest of the facilities regularly denied to blacks accepted the Choctaw, although hesitantly at first.<sup>119</sup> However, the economic improvement that the Choctaw experienced further raised them socially in the minds of white business owners and farmers. Whereas the first families that arrived could only speak Choctaw, were poor in possessions, and only wore traditional handmade garments, the younger members of the community learned English, families purchased common household appliances and new clothes, and in general

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Cubert Bell Sr., June 26, 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 112.

appeared to be making the effort to be like normal Americans to the white community.<sup>120</sup> One woman noted, “They was just real good Indians, and they tried to hold themselves up, and be good clean, decent Indians.”<sup>121</sup> Another person reported, “They have just come out a lot. They dress better and they have more in their homes.”<sup>122</sup> Their reputation for paying off debts also placed them in a higher category than blacks for the white community. According to white testimonies, the Choctaw worked without being watched unlike “Niggers,” they worked hard “unlike Niggers,” and they paid their bills unlike “Niggers.”<sup>123</sup> In sum, many whites believed that “They were just a little bit higher caliber than the Nigger was,” and hence the Choctaw’s ability to enter most whites-only businesses and facilities<sup>124</sup>

Living in Gold Dust improved the lives of the Choctaw by providing them with a sense of financial security, community, and a safe haven for their identity. The Choctaw made more money in Gold Dust than in Mississippi, even though they were still in the bottom rungs of the economy with an annual income between \$500-\$1,500.<sup>125</sup> The relationships between Choctaw sharecroppers and their landlords strengthened on account of the fact that the Choctaw always promptly paid back their debts at the end of the season.<sup>126</sup> The good reputation that the Choctaw built with their landlords helped them to purchase items that normally would be far out of their budget such as cars and washing machines, which they acquired with loans underwritten by their landlords.<sup>127</sup> The Choctaw were more accepted by whites in the Gold Dust community than back in Mississippi, where the white-operated Choctaw agency made the Choctaw on and near the reservation feel inferior and unable to succeed.<sup>128</sup> The Choctaw attended community events like

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>121</sup> Unknown Speaker, Ibid., 117.

<sup>122</sup> Unknown Speaker, Ibid., 116.

<sup>123</sup> Unknown Speaker, Ibid., 116.

<sup>124</sup> Unknown Speaker, Ibid., 116.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 42, 116.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>128</sup> Martin, 93-113.

annual fish fries and church gatherings.<sup>129</sup> They also continued to practice the essential traditions of their culture with no protest from the outside community.<sup>130</sup> The majority of the community continued to speak primarily Choctaw.<sup>131</sup> The kinship-based community was prevalent in Gold Dust and many of the families were related to each other.<sup>132</sup> The older women continued to make the traditional dresses for themselves and for the younger generations, whereas the older men still had their traditional shirts.<sup>133</sup> Whenever a death occurred the body was transported to the homeland, a tradition that continues to this day.<sup>134</sup> Many of the older Choctaw also continued to believe in the Choctaw religion and relied on Choctaw medicine men to cure them of their ills., in addition to sometimes resorting to the Christian religion and praying for help.<sup>135</sup> Although traditional dancing no longer was practiced in the community, several members travelled to the Choctaw Indian Fair back on the reservation in Mississippi to participate in the dances.<sup>136</sup> The most important event that reaffirmed the community's Choctaw identity though was the "everybody eat together" meal that happened on special occasions and families each contributed a dish.<sup>137</sup>

The Choctaw that moved to Gold Dust discovered another benefit in addition to higher-paying jobs; their children could attend the white schools all the way up to high school.<sup>138</sup> The schools on the reservation in contrast only went to the six grade and if a Choctaw Student wanted to continue on to high school, he or she had to attend boarding school far away in either Oklahoma or North Carolina.<sup>139</sup> Since many Choctaw families lived far away from the schools

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with the Bell family; Interview with Gwen Langford.

<sup>131</sup> Bell.

<sup>132</sup> Kenaston, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>134</sup> Bell.

<sup>135</sup> Kenaston, 130-131.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>139</sup> Martin, 22.



on the reservation and there was no bus, the Choctaw agency placed Choctaw children with families that lived close to the school during the week.<sup>140</sup> This was especially hard for the children placed with white families and who were only allowed to visit their families on the weekend.<sup>141</sup> Gold Dust provided a situation where the children could walk to the nearby school, and they could continue to high school. Families encouraged their children to attend school, even though they could not speak English, because they were aware that their children could achieve more in life with a better education.<sup>142</sup> This was certainly the case for Cubert Bell Sr.'s experience growing up in Gold Dust. His grandmother, even though she could not speak a word of English encouraged Bell to attend school.<sup>143</sup> Like for other students in the community and back in Mississippi on the reservation, Bell had to learn English when he went to first grade.<sup>144</sup> As many as fifty percent of the Choctaw children in Gold Dust failed their first year in school because they could not surpass the language barrier and there was no “help from home” as Bell put it.<sup>145</sup> Bell recalled of his experience:

I used to tell little kids when I would tell stories and this is true, but they didn't know that, they always thought that I was joking, I spent three years in first grade trying to learn the English language.<sup>146</sup>

There was no help at home in other words because they spoke very little [English], I was raised by my grandmother and she spoke very little English so how could she help me other than to encourage me to go to school?

When I grew up and became a parent, I swore that I would not let my children face that task. And so I went more English than I did Choctaw.

---

<sup>140</sup> Keck, “Growing up Choctaw: Sally Wells Celebrates Heritage at Pow Wow.”

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Bell.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

Encouraging English in the household was prevalent amongst many of the Choctaw families because as Bell pointed out, families wanted their children to be able to succeed in school and not have to go through the traumatic process of repeating first grade.<sup>147</sup> However, many children became bilingual in order to communicate with the elders in the community.<sup>148</sup> The continuation of the language is undoubtedly one of the most important parts of the Choctaw identity. It represents their history and encompasses a different way of thinking about the world. At the same time though, the Choctaw families encouraged English to improve their children's future and ensure that they could achieve better paying jobs. The balance between preserving the culture and absorbing white culture has been a precarious path for the Choctaw people. Living in isolated, impoverished communities in the past had assured that the Choctaw retained their culture from generation to generation, but as their children had more opportunities to achieve in the white world, the culture's continuation was threatened. The Choctaw in Gold Dust were fortunate to have their elders because many of them ensured that the children learned the language and traditions.

By the late 1960s, the Choctaw community in Gold Dust had greatly diminished as a result of the industrialization of the South. The sharecropping system was no longer economically viable. Consequently, many Choctaw moved back to Mississippi, where the reservation's economic situation was finally improving as a result of Chief Phillip Martin and his tribal council taking the power away from white superintendents.<sup>149</sup> Sharecropping was nonetheless extremely important in providing a means for families to sustain themselves, and in the case of the Choctaw in Gold Dust, a means to become financially successful. The fact that a significant number of Choctaw remained in Lauderdale County and moved into "the hills" area, which includes cities like Henning, Ripley, and Halls, to work in factories demonstrates that

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Martin, 93-113.

they were climbing the economic ladder. Bell reported that a lot of the women worked in the Tupperware factory in nearby Halls, TN from 1969-1995, when the factory closed.<sup>150</sup>

In order to preserve the culture and keep ties with one another, the Choctaw that dispersed into Lauderdale County began hosting the Faraway Choctaw Festival starting in 1988.<sup>151</sup> Traditions that had not been practiced amongst the younger generations, such as dancing and stickball, were revived at the festival.<sup>152</sup> Choctaw from Mississippi and older members of the Lauderdale community demonstrated using the traditional blowgun, storytelling, singing, beadwork, and how to cook traditional foods.<sup>153</sup> In addition to the festival, there was also a big push to curb the almost 100% dropout rate amongst Choctaw students with help from a federally funded after-school program known as “Project Smoke Signal.”<sup>154</sup> In 1995, at the request of the Choctaw in Lauderdale, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians purchased land and built seventeen houses with reimbursement from the government.<sup>155</sup> As of December 2012, that land was officially recognized as a part of the Mississippi Band’s reservation.<sup>156</sup> This is extremely good news for the tribe considering that retaining the culture has become more difficult after they stopped hosting the Faraway Choctaw Festival in the late 1990s. The festival stopped happening after the older generation, including Bell, was unable to continue organizing such a big event.<sup>157</sup> Bell hopes that the Mississippi Band will give the community a cultural boost by creating a facility building that would include a gymnasium, doctor’s offices, and a place where the culture would be taught to the younger generations. “As part of the Mississippi Band, we’re expecting equal treatment. Whatever the services they provide there [the

---

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Kelley, “Choctaw Festival celebrates tradition,” *The Commercial Appeal*, October 25, 1995.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Bell.

<sup>156</sup> Bell.

<sup>157</sup> Bell.

Mississippi Reservation], they should provide here.”<sup>158</sup> He had these final words to say about his community, “Our strongest point is that our children have learned Choctaw on the way up. Not as much as we would like, but there’s a reason behind everything.”<sup>159</sup> It is significant to note that in contrast to the cultural immersion programs that the tribe offers in Mississippi, the children on the Henning Reservation learned Choctaw from the elders in the community, without any assistance from school programs.

Sharecropping, churches, and education are important to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians’ history because they represent the steps that their ancestors took in order to secure a better future for the tribe. The Choctaw had to navigate an extremely hostile and confusing situation. The government suddenly became their worst enemy and whites could force them to leave their homelands. The only option to the Choctaw that remained was to hide and resist all efforts to relocate them to the west. After the Civil War though, the impoverished Choctaw emerged from hiding and took the opportunity to become sharecroppers in order to provide for their families. Although sharecropping initially was not profitable, it at least gave the Choctaw a sense of security as a third cultural identity amidst the South that defined itself and black and white. The emergence of churches further added to this security, both in the Mississippi communities and in the Gold Dust one. The fact that the church in Gold Dust formed as a result of being forced out of the white Baptist church demonstrates the amount of control that the dominant society wielded over the Choctaw wherever they went in the South. Education is an extremely important issue for the tribe. When Henry Halbert first taught the Choctaw, he understood that they could learn English ideas better through the Choctaw language. Unfortunately, the schools created under the Choctaw agency in Philadelphia did not follow in

---

<sup>158</sup> Bell.

<sup>159</sup> Bell.

this path and instead tried to force the Choctaw to only speak English and essentially become mirror images of American children. For the Choctaw that moved to Gold Dust in the 1950s, their children went through the traumatic process of being minority students and unable to speak English. While the problem has diminished on the reservation as a result of schools that encourage being Choctaw and succeeding academically, the Choctaw children in Lauderdale do not yet have this benefit. Fortunately, modern transportation provides Choctaw families with the ability to take their children to Mississippi and participate in events like the annual Choctaw Indian Fair and other cultural celebrations that the tribe hosts. Continuation of the culture is extremely important for the older members of the Choctaw community in Gold Dust and they have been doing everything they can to make sure their children retain their Choctaw identity.

## Bibliography

### Manuscript Sources

Memphis, TN  
The Chickasaw Heritage Collection.

### Interviews

The Bell Family: Gwen Langford, Nikki Bell, and Zach Bell, April 2013

Cubert Bell Sr., June 26, 2013

### Newspapers and Periodicals

The Dispatch

The Murfreesboro Post

The Commercial Appeal

### Websites

“2010 Census Table on Reported Tribes.” U.S. Census Bureau. United States Census 2010. Accessed July 31, 2013. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choctaw#cite\\_note-117](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choctaw#cite_note-117).

“History.” Mississippi Band Of Choctaw Indians. Accessed July 13, 2013. <http://www.choctaw.org/aboutMBCI/history/index.html>.

“Budget Justifications and Performance Information Fiscal Year 2014: Indian Affairs.” The United States Department of the Interior. Accessed July 31, 2013. [http://www.doi.gov/budget/appropriations/2014/upload/FY2014\\_IA\\_Greenbook.pdf](http://www.doi.gov/budget/appropriations/2014/upload/FY2014_IA_Greenbook.pdf).

“Termination Era 1950s, Public Law 280.” Federal Indian Law for Alaska Tribes. Accessed July 31, 2013. <http://tm112.community.uaf.edu/unit-2/termination-era-1950s-public-law-280/>.

“American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States Wall Maps.” U.S. Census Bureau. United States Census 2010. Accessed July 31, 2013. [http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/maps/aian\\_wall\\_maps.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/maps/aian_wall_maps.html).

“The Bashful Baptist Who Waxed Bold In the Lord.” GospelFuel. Accessed July 19, 2013. <http://www.gospelfuel.com/the-bashful-baptist-who-waxed-bold-in-the-lord-and-did-great-exploits-for-god/#fnref:7>.

“Voices of Choctaw Indians.” EchoSpaceDotOrg, Accessed July 19, 2013. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmRxPK\\_-EYQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmRxPK_-EYQ).

## Books and Articles

Akers, Donna L. *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004.

Chipman, Irene Yochum. *Gold Dust Tennessee*. Unknown publisher, 1987.

Cobb, Joseph B. *Mississippi Scenes; or Sketches of Southern and Western Life and Adventure, Humorous, Satirical, and Descriptive, Including the Legend of Black Creek*. Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1851.

Keck, Ben. "Growing up Choctaw: Sally Wells Celebrates Heritage at Pow Wow." *The Murfreesboro Post*, October 10, 2010.

Kelley, Michael. "Choctaw Festival celebrates tradition." *The Commercial Appeal*, October 25, 1995.

Kidwell, Clara Sue. "The Choctaw Struggle for Land and Identity in Mississippi: 1830-1918." In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 64-93. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

Langford, Sister John Christopher. "Holy Rosary Indian Mission: The Mississippi Choctaw and the Catholic Church," In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 112-121. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

Martin, Phillip. *Chief: The Autobiography of Chief Phillip Martin, Longtime Tribal Leader, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians*, edited by Lynne Jeter and Kendall Blanchard. Brandon: Quail Ridge Press, 2009.

McKee, Jesse O. and Steve Murray. "Economic Progress and Development of the Choctaw since 1945." In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 122-137. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

Roberts, Charles. "The Second Removal, 1903," In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 94-111. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

Satz, Ronald N. "The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency," In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 13-32. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

Simpson, Wilma. In "From The Trail of Tears to Today: The Choctaw Journey in Mississippi" by Sandra Knispel. *Mississippi Public Broadcasting: News*, February 14, 2011.

Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, September 27, 1830, reprinted in *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* by Jesse McKee and Jon A. Schlenker. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980.

Ward, Rufus. "Ask Rufus: Baskets hold story of early Choctaw," *The Dispatch*, November 17, 2012.

Ward, Rufus. "Choctaw Farmsteads in Mississippi, 1830," In *After Removal*, edited by Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, 122-137. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi and The Choctaw Heritage Press, 1986.

### **Journals**

Tubby, Estelline. In "The Paradox of Traditionalization: Negotiating the Past in Choctaw Prophetic Discourse" by Tom Mould. *Journal of Folklore Research* 42 (2005): 280.

Akers, Donna L. "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23:3 (1997): 63-76.

Osburn, Katherine. "The 'Identified Full-Bloods' in Mississippi: Race and Choctaw Identity, 1898-1918." *Ethnohistory* 56 (2009): 423-447.

### **Dissertations**

Kenaston, Monte Ray. "Sharecropping, Solidarity, and Social Cleavage: The Genesis of a Choctaw Sub-Community in Tennessee." PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1972. 1-183.