

The Chickasaws

A highly advanced tribe finds a new home

By DR. A. M. GIBSON

Federal Indian policy during the nineteenth century was inextricably tied in with Federal land policy. Eternally it seemed the national government was involved in negotiating land surrender treaties with the Indian tribes to make room for the settlers. At first these cession treaties provided for diminution of tribal domain; later as the frontier settlements intruded to the very edge of the diminished tribal ranges, the policy of relocation developed. This was the reason the national government established the Indian country west of Arkansas and Missouri. The southern half of this resettlement zone, the future Oklahoma, was assigned to the Five Civilized Tribes.

By 1837 the government tally on evacuating these tribes from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi showed that most of the Choctaws and Creeks, and about one-third of the Cherokees had been settled in Indian Territory. There remained a populous segment of Cherokees in Georgia, bands of Seminoles in Florida, and the Chickasaws, numbering somewhat over 4,000, in northern Mississippi.

The Chickasaws, of Muskogean linguistic stock, were closely related to the Choctaws; possibly at one time the Choctaws and Chickasaws had been one tribe. Their spoken language

except for dialectical differences was identical, and the same was true for the written language which missionaries developed for these two tribes. The historic Chickasaw range extended along the western frontiers of three states, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

This is the third in a series of articles on the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma, written by Dr. A. M. Gibson, chairman of the department of history, head of the division of manuscripts and curator of the Phillips Collection on the History of the West. Reprints are available in a limited quantity from Dr. Gibson's office.

Like the other nations of the southeastern Indian community, the Chickasaws had achieved an advanced culture before the coming of the European. Although skilled as hunters and warriors, they developed a sophisticated village life based on agriculture. The Chickasaw tribe was divided into clans, each clan ruled by a minor chief, and at the head of the nation was a principal chief, the mingo, chosen for life by the tribal council from the highest ranking clan.

The first substantial European con-

tact was with the Spanish. During 1541, Hernando De Soto and his men spent a season with the Chickasaws, imposing on tribal hospitality while resting from their travels. When De Soto was ready to resume his search for the fabled Cale, he demanded porters and women. This insulted tribal leaders and they sent warriors to attack De Soto's camp, and their fierce assault drove the Spaniards from the Chickasaw country.

In the European drive for control of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, the Chickasaws fell into the British orbit. Chickasaw warriors regularly attacked French towns north of the Ohio and preyed like river pirates on French and Spanish commerce on the Mississippi. Chickasaws served as agents for British traders, too, and the wide scope of their trading operations was shown by a Chickasaw trader turning up in the Wichita villages on the Canadian River in 1719 during Bernard de La Harpe's visit to this region.

British traders came to the Chickasaw Nation early in the period of Chickasaw delegation in 1851: "To appreciate the situation of the Chickasaws, it must be borne in mind they are only about one-fourth as numerous as the Choctaws. By the Treaty between the two Tribes they are entitled

European penetration of the Mississippi valley. Many took Chickasaw wives and established mixed-blood lines which came to play a leading role in tribal affairs in the East and later in Indian Territory. Some of the mixed-blood family names conspicuous in Chickasaw history were Adair, Cheadle, Gunn, McGee, Allen, Harris, Pickens, McLaughlin, Love, and McGillvery.

As was the case for the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws, the Chickasaws soon were surrounded by American settlements and the federal government encouraged tribal leaders to sign a removal treaty. Previous cession agreements with the United States had drastically reduced Chickasaw territory; an 1818 treaty cut off their range in western Kentucky and Tennessee and restricted the Chickasaw Nation to northern Mississippi and a strip of land in northwestern Alabama.

Government commissioners encouraged the chiefs to cede this last vestige of their eastern domain. The Chickasaws suffered harassment from the settlers much like the other tribes, and the Mississippi legislature adopted laws erasing tribal government and making all Chickasaws subject to state law. Tribal leaders, apparently aware that removal was inevitable, with creditable shrewdness and cunning held out just long enough to make it possible to wring from the government commissioners by far the best removal treaty negotiated with the Five Civilized Tribes.

During October, 1832, at the Chickasaw council house on Pontotoc Creek, tribal leaders signed a treaty with President Jackson's representatives providing for the cession of all Chickasaw lands east of the Mississippi as soon as a suitable home in the west could be found. By the terms of the Treaty of Pontotoc, the government was to survey the Chickasaw Nation, and after each Indian family had been assigned a homestead as a temporary residence until the western home was decided upon, the remainder of the land was to be sold at public sale, the proceeds to go into the Chickasaw national fund.

Between 1832 and 1837, Chickasaw delegations regularly visited the western frontiers of the United States searching for a new home. The Choctaw

choctaw Nation near Fort Towson, and signed an agreement known as the Treaty of Doaksville. By its terms the cherished hope of United States officials and Mississippians alike was satisfied in that finally the Chickasaws accepted a western home with the Choctaws. John McLish, Pitman Colbert, James Brown, and James Perry were the Chickasaw commissioners. Thomas LeFlore, Nitakechi, and Joseph Kinkaid, Choctaw district chiefs, represented their nation, and William Armstrong, Acting Superintendent for the Western Territory, was the principal signer for the United States.

Pressure by the state of Mississippi for an early evacuation caused the federal government to assist the Chickasaws in their search for a new home. Isaac McCoy, well-known on the Indian frontier as a Baptist missionary and government surveyor, was directed to look over the Osage country situated west of Missouri and north of the Cherokee Nation as a possible Chickasaw resettlement area. McCoy reported that the Mississippi Indians could be colonized there nicely, but a visiting Chickasaw delegation was not impressed with this region as a future home. Next, the federal government proposed that the Chickasaws settle between the Canadian and North Canadian in the western Creek country (an area that in 1856 was assigned to the Seminoles). This the Chickasaws declined, too. A Chickasaw delegation reportedly even looked over a 4,000,000 acre tract in north Texas and began preliminary negotiations with the Mexican government for purchase, but interest waned and the project was dropped.

Meanwhile, settler depredations on Chickasaw property increased. Home-seekers, indulged by sympathetic state law enforcement officers and courts, overran the Chickasaw country, squatting on Indian homesteads, and federal officials refused to protect Chickasaw interests as guaranteed by the Treaty of Pontotoc. This deliberate harassment convinced tribal leaders that a decision on a new western home was urgent. Thus, in November, 1836, a delegation went west to resume negotiations with the Choctaws. The Chickasaw council instructed its representatives to offer to pay the Choctaws no more than \$1,000,000 for a new domain.

On January 17, 1837, a Choctaw-Chickasaw council convened at Doaksville, a leading town in the southern

Choctaw Nation near Fort Towson, and signed an agreement known as the Treaty of Doaksville. By its terms the cherished hope of United States officials and Mississippians alike was satisfied in that finally the Chickasaws accepted a western home with the Choctaws. John McLish, Pitman Colbert, James Brown, and James Perry were the Chickasaw commissioners. Thomas LeFlore, Nitakechi, and Joseph Kinkaid, Choctaw district chiefs, represented their nation, and William Armstrong, Acting Superintendent for the Western Territory, was the principal signer for the United States.

The Choctaw settlements in Indian Territory were concentrated in the eastern third of that nation's domain. This settled area was divided into three districts, each ruled by a principal chief, the three together comprising the executive branch of the Choctaw Nation. In return for payment of \$530,000 into their national treasury, the Choctaws agreed to establish a fourth district, to be called the "Chickasaw District of the Choctaw Nation." The limits for the Chickasaw District as eventually worked out represented the center third of the Choctaw Nation, extending west to the 98th meridian. Chickasaws were to enjoy all the constitutional rights of Choctaws including suffrage, equal representation on the Choctaw national council, and holding of public office generally. Chickasaws and Choctaws could settle anyplace in the four districts. Each nation was to control and keep separate its annuities and tribal estate.

The Chickasaws began preparing to move west soon after their delegation returned with the tidings of the Doaksville council. The first party of migrants departed Pontotoc during the spring of 1837, and by 1840 most of the Chickasaws had arrived in Indian Territory. With a shorter distance to travel, and due to the wise management of their removal by tribal leaders, the Chickasaw relocation was the most peaceful and orderly experienced by the Five Civilized Tribes. The Indian families were able to collect most of their personal possessions, slaves, and livestock for transfer to Indian Territory. The migration stream for the In-

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After enduring the rigors of removal, the their absorption into the Choctaw Nation

dian Territory settlers was principally by river steamer up the Arkansas to Fort Coffee. Some families came overland by wagon. But even with their well-organized removal, they did not escape suffering and disease.

The Chickasaws were to pay for the cost of their removal, primarily transportation and subsistence costs, from their national fund. It was the practice of the government to let contracts to companies and individuals who agreed to supply transportation and rations for the emigrant Indians at so much per head. Chickasaw chiefs, aware of the hardships suffered by Creek, Choctaw, and other migrant groups due in part to dereliction on the part of callous contractors, sought to no avail to manage this important phase of their relocation. In the early stages of making preparations to move they wrote President Jackson of their "fear that our comfort will be neglected by the contractors."

On the trail to Indian Territory, cholera and smallpox struck their camps, but most of their suffering was due to gastro-intestinal disorders caused by spoiled meat and grain rations issued them by unscrupulous government contractors. For the removal the tribe divided into four companies, each headed by a Chickasaw leader. Chiefs Tishomingo, McGillvery, Alberson, and Sealy were the migration captains. These units divided into smaller groups at different points on the trail. The government staff accompanying each migration party consisted of a physician, whose duties included supervising the sanitation of the camps and certifying the quality of the rations issued, and a number of guides or conductors.

Upon arrival in Indian Territory, the Chickasaws stopped in the Choctaw

settlements to rest from their ordeal and adjust to the new land. The principal Chickasaw concentrations were at Eagletown, Doaksville, Brushy Creek, Fort Coffee, and on Boggy River. A road was cut from Fort Coffee on the Arkansas through the wilderness to the Boggy. There government contractors established an issue station and the new settlement took on the name of Boggy Depot, later a principal town in the western Choctaw Nation. Misfortune seemed to stalk the migrants. While crossing Arkansas, several Chickasaws were stricken and died from smallpox. The disease persisted and several of their Indian Territory camps were ravaged. Removal officials at the Chickasaw camp near Fort Coffee reported the disease was "progressing rapidly" infecting also the Choctaws, thirty Indians had died since arrival, and soldiers from forts Coffee and Gibson were coming to the villages to vaccinate the survivors.

Many of the Chickasaws carried substantial sums of money from the sale of improvements on their Mississippi allotments. While some used their grubstake to finance idleness and occasional drunken sprees, many invested their personal funds in livestock, seeds, and slaves. The latter were eager to move into their district and open new farms, plantations, and ranches. But disturbing reports from traders and trappers, recently arrived from the Washita, telling of eastward thrusts by savage bands of Kiowas, Comanches, and Kickapoos discouraged the Chickasaw settlers, and as an Indian agent put it, they were "settling promiscuously" among the Choctaws.

Choctaw leaders encouraged the Chickasaws to emigrate to their district at an early date. There was some local resentment at the personal wealth of the Chickasaws. And the fact that many of the new arrivals from Mississippi were spending their money on whiskey, gambling, and a good time generally, creating disorder, and debauching Choctaws, gave the host officials a sound argument. Also, the Choctaw constitution had been revised to include the Chickasaw District and the Choctaw chiefs and council were eager to have it settled in order that political organization could be carried out. In addition, while the Choctaws were silent on this matter, it is very likely that one of their prime motivations for pressuring the Chickasaws to settle their district was to establish a populous buffer zone in the center of their vast territory to protect their settlements from attack by the wild tribes roaming the western borders.

The Chickasaws, apprehensive over moving to their district as long as life and property were unsafe there, exercised their rights under the Treaty of Doaksville whereby they could settle in any of the four districts, and remained east of their assigned constituency. Apparently civilization had pacified the Chickasaws, for there was no indication that the warriors felt obliged to fulfill the great martial traditions of their ancestors, who in colonial times were the terrors of the Mississippi valley. This caused the Choctaws to turn to the federal government for help in making the Chickasaw District safe for settlement. Military posts were recommended, and until these were constructed, troops from Fort Gibson ranged over the Chickasaw District in an attempt to

Chickasaws soon became dissatisfied with and the tribe began pressing for secession

clear the area of Indian intruders. As late as 1841 two companies of dragoons under Captain B. D. Moore, patrolled the Chickasaw District, making contact with renegade bands and ordering them out.

Finally, in 1842, Fort Washita was established. General Zachary Taylor, commander of the Second Military District which included Indian Territory, selected a site for this Chickasaw District post on the uplands about fifteen miles above the mouth of the Washita. Wide ranging troopers from Fort Washita kept constant surveillance for intruders and helped tame this raw frontier. Additional protection for the Chickasaw District was provided in 1851 with the construction of Fort Arbuckle, situated north of Fort Washita on Wild Horse Creek.

Under the patronage of the garrison at Fort Washita, Chickasaws began moving to their district with confidence, and before 1842 ended, even tribal leaders, "among them some of the largest planters" in the nation, were venturing into the rich valleys of the Washita, Boggy, and Blue. The mixed-blood Chickasaw planters found the custom of holding lands in common advantageous to their interests. All members had equal rights to share in the tribal domain. A tribal citizen could hunt, fish, and cut timber in all places not occupied by towns, farms, and plantations. The Chickasaws, in common with the other members of the Five Civilized Tribes community, followed the open-range practice. Livestock, carrying the owner's brand or mark, grazed at large on the public domain. Cultivated land was enclosed with rail fence. There

was plenty of land for all; the man-land ratio or population density in the Chickasaw District was low—less than two persons per square mile. And since it was public land, there were no taxes. An Indian citizen could clear, improve, and cultivate as much land as he wished, provided he did not encroach on his neighbor. Tribal law permitted a citizen to sell his improvements or pass them on to his heirs. While full-blood subsistence patches ranged from three to ten acres, mixed-blood developments were generally considerably larger. The most extensive plantations in the Chickasaw District were in the valleys of the Red and Washita where Chickasaw planters often had single fields for cotton and corn of 500 acres. Robert Love, a Chickasaw mixed-blood, operated two large plantations on the Red and owned 200 slaves. Each autumn he traveled to New Orleans and chartered a steamer to come up-river and carry out his crop which generally ran from 300 to 500 bales of cotton.

In the Chickasaw District the traditional Indian town declined as old tribal forms were altered and the Indians came to follow the familiar American rural pattern—dispersing and settling on detached, separate family farms and plantations. Towns thereby became trade, political, and educational centers. A blacksmith shop, gin, grist and saw mill, stores, warehouses for traders, schools and churches, postoffice, often a hotel, tribal government buildings, and a stage office were the ordinary components of the early Chickasaw towns. The leading towns in the Chickasaw District were Tishomingo and Oak Grove. Mail and stage service and newspapers including the *Chickasaw Intelligencer* kept townspeople and country dwellers

well-informed on local, national, and world events.

With all their prosperity and advances in the arts of civilization, the Chickasaws were restive. Their principal complaint was the Treaty of Doaksville which erased their national identity by integrating them into the Choctaw Nation. After the ordeal of removal had passed, Chickasaw leaders began to express their resentment at this arrangement.

As a minority group in the Choctaw Nation the Chickasaws shared in the rights of the Choctaw constitution, including active participation in the Choctaw government. They were entitled to elect one of the four district chiefs, and were allocated thirteen seats in the Choctaw national council. The Chickasaws first participated in Choctaw Nation politics in the fall of 1841 by electing a district chief and their quota of council members. The Chickasaw chief, members of the council, and local officers were required to live in the Chickasaw District and the presence of troops at Fort Washita beginning in 1842 made it safe to settle that area.

By 1845 the Chickasaws regarded their absorption into the Choctaw Nation with such misgivings that a secession movement got underway. Chickasaw leaders wrote the President and Commissioner of Indian Affairs expressing their resentment at what they termed the "inevitable domination by the more numerous Choctaws." They claimed competence to handle their own affairs, and appealed for separation. A summary of their grievances was presented to the President by a

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The Chickasaws paid \$150,000 for the center third of the Choctaw Nation

to representation in the Choctaw Council which makes all the laws; but being in a very small minority their voice is neither felt or heard in that body; practically they have no participation in making the laws to which they are subjected; and often laws are enforced upon them to which the whole tribe is unanimously opposed. They are completely at the mercy of the Choctaws, and every Chickasaw feels that he is oppressed by them. The people of both tribes are entitled to the same privileges everywhere in the nation by the Treaty: but the Choctaws regard and treat the Chickasaws everywhere out of their own district as intruders, and it is frequently thrown up to them as a reproach that they have no rights in the country. This is the cause of many private difficulties, frequently ending in the death of one or the other of the parties, and the number of these is constantly increasing. . .

"The impression is becoming prevalent that the existing relations between the two people cannot submit much longer in peace. The Chickasaws are dissatisfied with their present political condition; nothing but a separation from the Choctaws will ever satisfy them. The sooner this is effected we believe the better for all parties."

While Chickasaw leaders were building their case for separation from the Choctaws, they also went about establishing a workable district government which could become a tribal government once their goal was achieved. Isaac Alberson, Chickasaw district chief during the 1840's,

worked hard to settle all his people in their constituency and restore tribal unity by providing Chickasaw laws, officials, and schools. And in proportion to the growing reluctance of Choctaw leaders to consider a dissolution of the union, Chickasaw nationalism grew stronger with each attempt of the Choctaws to discourage the separation. In 1845 at Boiling Springs near Fort Washita, a Chickasaw convention met to begin the organization of a separate tribal government. The following year the convention drafted an outline of government which marked the first attempt by the Chickasaws to produce a written constitution. Then in 1848 the Chickasaw convention drafted a more detailed organic law providing for the organization of executive and legislative departments, definition of citizenship, bill of rights, and handling of the national fund. Electors were defined as all males sixteen years of age and over. Edmund Pickens was elected chief under this constitution.

By this action, the Chickasaws were in the curious position of living under two governments, for besides their own *de facto* establishment, which was operating on an increasingly independent basis, they also continued to associate politically with the Choctaws as required by the Treaty of Doaksville, all the while grumbling

about the unpleasantness of their satellite role. Apparently Choctaw leaders tired of the eternal complaints of their adopted community, and in June, 1855, a Choctaw delegation consisting of Peter Pitchlynn, Israel Folsom, Samuel Garland, and Dickson W. Lewis met in Washington with a Chickasaw delegation which included Edmund Pickens and Sampson Folsom for the purpose of negotiating a dissolution of the union formed by the Treaty of Doaksville in 1837.

The Choctaw-Chickasaw Treaty of 1855, negotiated by George W. Manypenny, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, provided for a three-way division of the old Choctaw Nation. The Choctaws retained the eastern third of this vast domain as the new Choctaw Nation. The Chickasaws, by paying the Choctaws \$150,000, received the center third of the old Choctaw Nation as their own, independent, separate domain. The western third, that portion extending from the 98th to the 100th meridian, was leased on a perpetual basis to the United States government for \$800,000; the Choctaws received three-fourths of this sum, the Chickasaws one-fourth.

Their political union with the Choctaws dissolved, the Chickasaws met in mass convention the following year at Good Spring on Pennington Creek,



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this time to write a constitution which would establish a *de jure* government to replace the *de facto* operation they had stubbornly maintained through the years. This organic law produced by a convention headed by Jackson Kemp, provided for a chief executive called the Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, elected for a two-year term; a bicameral national council, consisting of a house of representatives, the members apportioned on the basis of population and elected annually; a

senate, the members elected from four senatorial districts corresponding to the four counties of the nation (Panola, Pickens, Pontotoc, and Tishomingo), each district allocated three senators, these officers elected for two-year terms; and a judiciary containing a supreme court, circuit court, and four county courts. A bill of rights was included, and eligible voters were defined as all male citizens nineteen years of age and over. For many years the Chickasaws had been strong sup-

porters of education which was reflected in their constitution. A superintendent of public instruction, elected to a four-year term by the national council was assigned the duty of organizing a school system for the nation. The new Chickasaw government met in a hewn-log house until 1858 when a brick capitol building was constructed at Tishomingo City. In the first election held under this constitution, Cyrus Harris was selected governor, and Holmes Colbert won the office of national secretary.

Having accomplished at long last their hearts desire, the Chickasaws happily went to work developing their new, independent nation. They had made only a fair start in this direction when the American Civil War began. The Chickasaws with the other Five Civilized Tribes succumbed to Confederate promises and signed the famous Pike treaties in 1861. The war and the reconstruction treaties of 1866 devastated the Chickasaw Nation. In their embarrassed and weakened state, the Chickasaws were easily imposed upon by the United States government, which regularly called upon this nation to surrender various rights and privileges culminating in allotment in severalty by the Otoka Agreement in 1897, dissolution of the nation as a political entity, and fusion with Oklahoma Territory to form the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

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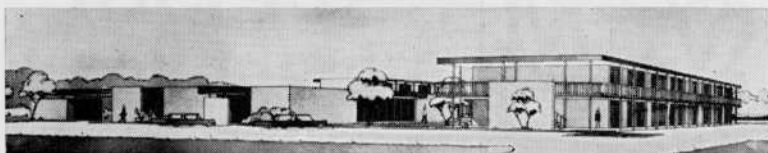
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