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Mississippi Choctaw Women: Preservation and Adaptation from Post-Removal to the 1970s

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MISSISSIPPI CHOCTAW WOMEN: PRESERVATION AND ADAPTATION FROM
POST-REMOVAL TO THE 1970s

by

Elisabeth Hart Pepper

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

ELISABETH HART PEPPER: Mississippi Choctaw Women: Preservation and
Adaptation from post-Removal to the 1970s

(Under the direction of Mikaela Adams)

This project analyzes the processes of adaptation and preservation utilized by Choctaw women in Mississippi from the post-Removal period to the end of the 1970s. It focuses specifically on the areas of women's lives concerning work, the domestic sphere, leadership roles, and recreational activities. To inform my research, I used a variety of primary and secondary sources concerning the Mississippi Choctaws, even covering the period before Removal. I studied archival documents, microfilm, newspapers, magazines and pamphlets, as well as secondary resource books concerning this topic. From my research, I concluded that women actively engaged in strategies to preserve their Choctaw identity, while simultaneously adapting to their changing environment. Choctaw women held on to their cultural pattern of gender distinctions and adapted them to fit with their generation. This process of preservation resulted in many of these gender ideas still being present within the tribe at the end of the twentieth century.

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On a national and global scale, gender today is being redefined to challenge master narratives that often exclude female voices. However, oftentimes this new rhetoric does not speak for all women in all places and wrongly imagines the experiences of white, cisgender, middle-class women as representative of all women. In order to prevent a new incomplete and over-generalized master narrative from emerging, scholars must recognize the diversity of women's experiences and include the stories of women who are often marginalized or forgotten by mainstream American society. Studying Mississippi Choctaw women from the post-Removal era to present day works towards this goal by revealing the evolving and enduring nature of gender roles in a particular southeastern American Indian society. In this project, I have aimed to contribute both to women's history and the history of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

In my research, I cover many different aspects of Choctaw life and demonstrate their relationship to changing and enduring Choctaw gender roles from the post-Removal period to the latter part of the twentieth century. I examine the ways that Choctaw women adapted and modified their roles and responsibilities to respond to new circumstances and new pressures, but also show how certain, fundamental elements of their gender identity remained unchanged. In particular, I focus on Choctaw women in the work world, in the domestic sphere, in leadership positions, and in recreational activities. The goal of this project is to come to a fuller understanding of the diverse roles Choctaw women played in their society and how they viewed themselves in these roles.

In my research, I found that Choctaw women adapted their gender roles to respond to new pressures but maintained certain key elements of their gender identity that helped mark them as distinctly Choctaw. The identity as a “Choctaw” woman was the way that Choctaw women self-identified, but the way they demonstrated that identity was through their cultural practices. With or without them, they were Choctaw, but their practices enabled them to demonstrate to the outside world who they were as a separate political identity. Choctaw women moved from the domestic sphere and farming into new jobs in industries of health, business, education, and more, in response to economic changes. While this marked a change in Choctaw women’s type of work, it also showed a continuity of long-established women’s working gender ideals. Choctaw women continued to work to support their family, a role which they filled even before Removal. In the domestic sphere, kinship, courtship, marriage, and the home itself changed as Choctaws adopted American ideals concerning home life. The Choctaw matrilineal system was replaced with patriarchal, bilateral system, and Choctaw women had to work to maintain their power in this new family dynamic. For example, Choctaw women held fast to their role in matchmaking, although they had to share the duties with their husbands. Customarily, Choctaw women were able to influence politics but were not allowed formal leadership positions within the tribe. After the 1945 reorganization of the tribe and implementation of the new Choctaw constitution, women made strategic moves into formal positions of power. Women continued in cultural practices of political activism, but in their new positions of power were able to make more meaningful contributions. They formed organizations which supported other Choctaw women, and left a legacy for the next generation of Choctaw women to become political leaders. In

the 1970s, Choctaw women spent their leisure time engaging in both popular Choctaw recreational activities and American pastimes. Choctaw women played stickball, worked on their artistry and listened to American popular music. Because of their efforts, Choctaw women were able to preserve time-honored activities and enjoy what the broader world had to offer. These are just a few primary examples of the ways in which Choctaw women navigated their changing world. The women of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians reshaped their conventional gender roles to better fit their world as it changed, but they held onto defining characteristics and refused to abandon that which made them Choctaw.

By better understanding the experiences of this group of women over the period after Removal, we come to understand how they have experienced change alongside other Americans in ways both similar and dissimilar. The Choctaws' choice to remain a distinctive group rather than assimilating into mainstream American society demonstrated both the pride Choctaws had in their identity and the draw Choctaw culture had for its members. Choctaw women found meaning in their identity as not just women, but as Choctaw women, and they preserved many aspects of this distinct identity over time. This project grapples with what that identity encompasses and how being a Choctaw woman has changed in the recent past. In my project, I outline the things that Choctaw women let go of, like pottery and farming and the things which they held onto, like ideas of equality in men and women's work and stickball. My project contributes both to the canon of literature concerning Choctaw women and to the ongoing and prevalent subject of changing gender roles.

The aim of my project is to deliver a specific and unique account that will enrich the stories of women and Mississippi Choctaws and how they lived and survived in the South. Consequently, it neither speaks for all American Indian women, nor does it even speak for all Choctaw women, since the Choctaws who removed to Indian Territory had different experiences from those who remained in the South. It is a project confined to a specific period covering the changing gender roles of women post-Removal through the 1970s. Although the early history of the Choctaws informed my understanding of Choctaw gender roles and worldviews, the project does not go into depth about the pre-Removal period. I chose this point in time because the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians that is present today descended from the Choctaws who remained in Mississippi after Removal and understanding the post-Removal period is key to making sense of how the tribe survived and ultimately continues to thrive as a distinct ethnic and political group in modern America. In addition, although, this project contrasts men and women's gender roles, it does not specifically focus on Choctaw men and their experience of gender. I chose to end my project in the 1970s because that was when the Samuel Proctor Oral history interviews of the Choctaws were compiled. These interviews contain the voices of the Choctaw women who I study, and I want their voices to come through in the project. Also, I end my project before the industrial park was built in 1979, because it changed the Choctaw economy. Those changes occurred outside the scope of my project.

My project contributes to the already existing work covering the Mississippi Choctaws. There have been ethnohistory reports, interviews, books and research projects covering the Mississippi Choctaws from the time before European contact to the present

day. My project adds a specialized account solely focused on Choctaw women to this existing canon of literature. Through these resources, I formed my understanding of Choctaw women and their experiences from Removal to the 1970s. My project reaffirms the premise that Choctaws used assimilation and adaptation techniques in response to their changing environment, which has been laid out in many of the secondary sources I used. My project explains how those strategies worked on a local and individualized level specifically for the women of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

One of the secondary sources I use is James Taylor Carson's book *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*. This book is helpful for providing the initial historical background of the Choctaws, as well as illuminating deep cultural patterns that persisted into the Removal period and beyond. He describes persistent cultural patterns such as the gendered separation of men and women's roles in society, a matrilineal kinship system, and Choctaw agency in their continued struggle with American forces. This text, like many other historical writings on the Choctaws, covers them in an earlier time period than I specifically focus on. Also, it covers a multitude of facets of Choctaw culture, whereas I focus on gender roles more specifically and limit that even further to the experiences of women. My project builds on Carson's work with a focus on cultural practices and markers of Choctaw identity, but my project differs primarily in my narrow focus.¹

Another one of my secondary sources, *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* by Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, provides a good reference point

¹ James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

for my research and points out predominant aspects of Choctaw culture that I consider and address in my research. For example, in the period after Removal, the federal government believed only Choctaws who had largely assimilated into American culture would remain; however, most of those who remained were committed to Choctaw autonomy and Choctaw heritage.² This is important to address because it details a lot about the values of the Choctaw women in my research. It provides much information on the Choctaws, but as the name suggests also covers many other tribes. In addition, it covers many different historical and cultural aspects of these many tribes, while my research is more specific. It is a useful secondary source, though, because it points out that many Indians in the Southeast shared similar experiences. There often is not a lot of information in the historical record concerning women's activities, so it is often necessary to use these cross-cultural comparisons to make an educated guess about the daily lives of Choctaw women. This is an ethnohistorical technique which requires careful scrutiny and a critical analysis of the work being compared as well as vetting the sources used in evidence of this activity. My research builds on the specific culture of the Choctaw, but it adds to one specific gendered group instead of the experience of the society as a whole.

Theda Perdue also penned another secondary source that I use: *Cherokee Women*. Similarly, to my project, Perdue's book focuses on one specific Indian group, in her case the Cherokees. Perdue discusses some different aspects than I do to in her book, but she does discuss things prevalent to my research like gender roles, devoting an entire chapter to their construct. In this chapter, she explains the gendered division of labor as well as

² Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

other tasks, duties and responsibilities left to women. Perdue details specific rituals and practices that were kept such as what was observed during the time when women menstruated or before warriors were heading off to war. She also provides a model of how research like mine should be approached in both study and writing. She writes clearly and objectively but infuses the work with rich detail, providing a snapshot of life for the Cherokee women. My project aims to add specifically to this realm of American Indian literature, but mine focuses on the individual experiences of Mississippi Choctaw women.³

After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi by Samuel Wells and Roseanna Tubby covers the historical period I focus on in my writing. The authors cover a broader picture of the Choctaw community in Mississippi than my project reaches, describing the experience of the tribe as a whole and not as much the experience of individuals. However, the information in this book is useful in providing a historical context of the range of years I cover in my research. An entire chapter is devoted to what farming looked like for the Choctaws, which was a primary source of income for many of them. Another chapter looks at the struggles and political challenges facing Choctaws from the mid-to-latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.⁴ My project adds to the literature covering this time period but almost exclusively covers the experience of women, and not the community as a whole.

A particularly important secondary source material for my research is the book *Choctaw Resurgence in Mississippi: Race, Class, and Nation Building in the Jim Crow*

³ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) 3-195.

⁴ Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby, *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

South, 1830-1977 by Katherine Osburn. This book covers the same time period I cover in my project. It focuses more specifically on the political hardships that the Choctaws endured and fought against, which is an important aspect of my third chapter covering political and other leadership roles. Osburn looks at key events in the history of the Mississippi Choctaws such as the major removals, their receipt of recognition by the U.S. federal government, their dealings with the government during the Great Depression and their struggles during the Civil Rights movement.⁵

My most important archival resource comes from the writings of Henry S. Halbert, during his time among the Mississippi Choctaws. From the 1880s to the 1890s, Halbert worked as a teacher on the Choctaw reservation. While there, he studied many different aspects of their culture and recorded his findings. He noted everything from marriage customs to their oral histories passed down. His work helped me analyze a large period of time within the century and a half I covered. He recorded what older Choctaws told him life used to be like as well as what he saw around him daily. His work was crucial to my understanding of what everyday life among the Choctaws looked like.

The interviews I focus heavily on in the seventies were collected as part of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program. Samuel Proctor founded this program at the University of Florida, and his project led to interviews across the South. One of the subsections of his project was focused specifically on interviewing Native Americans. As part of this project, he and his staff conducted a series of interviews at the Mississippi Choctaw reservation. They interviewed men and women, old and young. Their

⁵ Katherine M. B. Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence in Mississippi: Race, Class, and Nation Building in the Jim Crow South, 1830-1977* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

interviews formed the basis of my understanding about daily Choctaw life in the seventies and even before. In his interviews with older Choctaws, he asked them about their early experiences in the first half of the twentieth century. This source was extremely valuable because through it, the voices of Choctaw women can be heard.

These are only some of the sources I used in my research. I also made extensive use of primary sources, including newspaper articles, ethnographic reports, government documents and microfilmed historical documents.⁶ Because a large portion of my project is centered in the past, I relied on an ethnohistorical approach to explain what that past looked like. Ethnohistory looks at how cultures change over time, which is a defining point of my research and is fundamental to my work. In my ethnohistorical endeavor, I sought to understand Choctaw women as both an anthropologist and historian in order to develop a fuller understanding of my subject. It required analysis of individual cultural aspects and their development and progression, or lack of change, over time.

⁶ Interview with Callie Dixon, June 28, 1975, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); Interview with Delaura Henry, January 31, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); Interview with Karen Lilly, October 1, 1979, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); Interview with Linda Willis, August 29, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); Interview with Louise Willis, December 4, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); Interview with Phillip Martin, January 21, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005); John H. Peterson, "Assimilation, Separation, and Out-Migration in an American Indian Group," *American Anthropologist* 74 (Mississippi State University, 1972): 1-10, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1972.74.5.02a00200/epdf>; John R. Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 1-294.

My first chapter focuses on “women’s work.” I discuss what the term means in the context of Choctaw gender divisions. I address the roots of complementary gender roles in Choctaw society, then move to discussing what those looked like post-Removal. I analyze individual elements that define women’s work and differentiate it from “men’s work.” Then, I present what modern Choctaw women’s work looked like until the end of the 1970s and how that work was similar and dissimilar to earlier Choctaw women’s work. Similarities include women’s work with children and in positions of education, and dissimilarities include the move by women from their home and farm into the public sphere. I end the chapter by discussing the continuity of the similarities and the discontinuity which made it ultimately different.

My second chapter covers women’s roles within the domestic sphere. In this chapter I analyze the activities of women inside the home and the job roles they held as compared to their male counterparts. I ask questions such as, “do the early gendered divisions of labor within the home translate into modern labor divisions?” and “are old Choctaw recipes still prepared as part of a regular diet?” In addition to these questions, I look at what constitutes a Choctaw family and how the family unit is defined. To understand this, I look at their kinship system and marriage customs. I analyze individual case studies of weddings that were part of cultural practice and how those practices fell out of use and were replaced. I further analyze how American influence, particularly through the church, changed the kinship system and family relationships of Choctaws.

My third chapter looks at the leadership roles of women within the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. I study what avenues of power were customarily held by Choctaw women, in contrast with those reserved for men. I then look at that change over

time, to explain how these roles have altered as the meaning of leadership has altered. I explore leadership roles both inside and outside of politics, such as leadership roles within Choctaw religious worship. For example, I examine how women's religious roles and avenues for leadership changed after many Choctaws converted to Christianity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I also examine the roles played by women in the establishment of the tribe's new constitutional government in 1945 and what kinds of political positions Choctaw women held after that change.

My last chapter covers women's recreational activities. I look at the most popular recreational activities of the past and present. I discuss what these recreational activities focus on and what that reveals about Choctaw women. In this chapter I draw attention to the diversity of activities practiced by Choctaw women from stickball, a game also played by men, to the Choctaw Indian Princess pageant. I analyze how early women's activities were utilitarian as well as artistic, and how that relationship persisted into the twentieth century. I analyze the customary Choctaw craft of pottery and its fall into disuse, and compare it to other arts that persisted and remained. I look at the influence of American pastimes on the way Choctaw women chose to spend their leisure time towards the end of the twentieth century.

The aspects of Choctaw women's lives that I focus on reveal key facets that defined life for Mississippi Choctaw women after removal. In looking at Choctaw women's work, domestic roles, leadership and recreational activities I demonstrate the active role women played in the constantly changing world around them. I point out how women responded differently to these pressures, and how all of these responses made sense within their historical and cultural contexts. Instead of focusing on the hardships

that women faced, I place greater emphasis on the bravery and fortitude with which they faced these trials. Not simply victims, Choctaw women were active and involved agents in their lives. Choctaw women met the future head on, adapting and persevering, but always preserving their identity as Choctaw women. Choctaw women lived and celebrated their differences, proud of their identity as a distinct people.

Women's Work

“Women’s work” in our modern-day, Western understanding of the phrase is often seen as derogatory label, and as a society we have worked to challenge labelling jobs as gender-specific. But in order to understand the cultural practice of the Choctaw division of labor, one has to abandon these ideas of job inferiority as it is related to sex. The Choctaws, like many other Native American communities, have long had a gendered division of labor, and this division was formed with the idea of what historian James Taylor Carson and others call complementary roles. An example of what this looked like in Native communities would have been men going out to hunt their food, and women preparing and making that animal into a meal. In many Native societies, women were also farmers. Each participant played a necessary role in this basic need of food preparation, and there was symmetry to it. There is no evidence to suggest that one group’s work was thought to be more important or more valued than another.⁷ But it was clear that each group’s work was confined most often to each respective gender. If a man was observed doing household chores he would be ridiculed by the women, and such forms of social control helped maintain separate spheres for men and women.⁸ This social construct, whereby Choctaw men and women work at different jobs but both support their family, persisted even into the end of the twentieth century.

⁷ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 16.

⁸ Jesse O. McKee and Jon A. Schlenker, *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980), 29.

Historically, one of the primary jobs of Choctaw women was farming. Women's role as farmers was derived from a special connection they held to the land. Choctaw society was structured around a matrilineal kinship system, and this resulted in the women owning the land. Women's workspace was in and around the home, and in that capacity, they were the property owners. Women were viewed as a constant, grounded figure, and the organization of their society reflected that. Women owned the property, and after marriage a husband would move in with his wife. The home and farm land were the woman's property and responsibility.⁹ Women's place as farmers was upheld by historic Choctaw lore as well. In one of the origin stories about corn, it was told that a crow brought a kernel of corn to the Choctaws. A Choctaw child brought it to his mother, who told him what it was and planted it. From then on, she tended to the corn, and this was considered the foundation of the relationship between Choctaw women and corn. This story was told to explain the ancient role of women as farmers and their connection to the land and corn.¹⁰

Farming was one of the women's most important roles because their harvest formed the basis of the Choctaw diet.¹¹ The farming of corn, a diet staple, and other crops was done at a subsistence level and looked much different from later plantations which characterized the Southeastern landscape. Scholars estimate as much as two-thirds

⁹ File: 25 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 19, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁰ File: 42 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹¹ Rauna Kuokkanen, "Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women: Exploring the Social Economy Model for Indigenous Governance," *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 35 (2011): 223.

of the Choctaw diet was derived from the fields.¹² Corn was the lifeblood of the Choctaw community, literally sustaining them in times of hardship. A portion of the corn Choctaw women grew was allotted to a public corn crib, and if a family ran out of corn in the winter, they ate from this supply. In addition to corn, women grew other foodstuffs including sweet potatoes and pumpkins, adding variety to their diet.¹³ In the Choctaw economy, women did not play an accessory role but were equally yoked with men in the work they performed.

Women were also responsible for preparing meals for their families and communities. This included everything from grinding up the corn that they grew to cleaning the animals that the men brought back from the chase. When the men went on extended hunting trips that required quite some time away from their home, a few women accompanied them to dress and cook the animals in their temporary camps. The Choctaws valued animals for more than just their meat. Choctaw women processed their hides and sewed them into clothing. In addition, they fashioned various tools from their antlers and bones. By the 1830s, the Choctaws were integrated into the market economy with traders. Many of the hides women prepared were taken and sold to these traders.¹⁴ Whenever there was a community gathering, women worked even longer hours preparing meals. They were expected to furnish the food for all sporting events, funerals and any other special events that were sprung upon them. When commissioners from the federal government came to make the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Choctaw women had to

¹² Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 17.

¹³ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 8, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁴ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 18.

cook for their guests.¹⁵ Cooking was no small task for Choctaw women. The time and effort required to make a pot of hominy required hours of hard labor. Women had to pound corn until the husks were separated, sift and re-sift the meal, and constantly stir their vat of hominy. All of this was done using cooking instruments that they also had to make.¹⁶

Choctaw women also put crafting skills to use to make pottery and weave baskets. These practices were both utilitarian as well as artistic in nature. Baskets were made and used to collect vegetables and other farm produce. The common design for the Choctaw baskets was a diamond pattern, and they were dyed to the color preference of the weaver. Using berries, flowers, roots, and bark the women could achieve a variety of colors in their baskets.¹⁷ Each basket was utilized for a specific task by Choctaw women. Choctaw women wove and used “kishi” baskets to carry food or household items in. Women wove “ofko” baskets, which were used as sifters in cooking. They made “taphorik” baskets which were small and used for a variety of purposes around the house. Before the widespread use of European kitchen wares, Choctaw women also crafted their own earthenware pottery. They molded and fired these pieces, which were used as cooking bowls.¹⁸ Choctaw women were craftswomen, creating pieces which were decorative and, most importantly, useful.

¹⁵ File: p. 1-220 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 18-30, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁶ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 8, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁷ “Choctaw Baskets,” <http://www.choctaw.org/culture/baskets.html>.

¹⁸ File: 28 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 1-56, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

This Choctaw gendered division of labor was shared by many other tribes in the Southeast region, such as their neighbors, the Cherokees.¹⁹ While no two tribes shared the same experience, this gendered construct of society was not uncommon. The work of Choctaw women was woven into their identities and continued to define them even as their world underwent massive social changes in the years following sustained contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans.

Much changed for the Choctaws with the settlement and proliferation of Europeans who eventually became Americans. Not long after their arrival, these intruders had begun to place pressure on Indian tribes to move West to make room for these land-hungry expansionists. In 1830, under the Jackson administration the president pushed the Indian Removal Act through Congress. With the passing of this act Secretary-of-War, John Eaton, traveled to Mississippi to negotiate the removal of the Choctaw Indians west to Oklahoma. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek launched the removal of large numbers of Choctaws, but under the Article Fourteen provision some Choctaws were allowed to stay. Roughly six-thousand Choctaws opted to stay in Mississippi, far more than the federal government or white citizens of Mississippi were hoping for.²⁰ Further enticements of land by the government brought this number down to just fifteen-hundred by the end of the 1840s.²¹ Those who remained were forced to fight with the government and corrupt officials to obtain the land grants that were

¹⁹ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 20-25.

²⁰ Ronald N. Satz, "The Mississippi Choctaw: From the Removal Treaty to the Federal Agency," *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 3-7.

²¹ Theda Perdue, "The Legacy of Indian Removal" *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. LXXVIII, no. 1 (2012): 5.

promised to them under Article Fourteen.²² Many of these promises remained unfulfilled, and these Choctaws' contemporaries reported seeing Indians often only partially clothed and suffering from hunger.²³

In this new Mississippi, Choctaw women, deprived of their extensive lands, had to find additional means of survival. Often, this meant women had to perform whatever jobs were available to them. Women worked as itinerant farmers picking cotton alongside black slaves. These women and their families lived as squatters, since their corrupt federal agent denied many Choctaw families their reservation land.²⁴ On these borrowed lands, they built their cabins and engaged in a lifestyle similar but more limited to the one they had known before Removal. Choctaw women planted small patches of corn, potatoes, and pumpkins. With the arrival of Europeans, they also incorporated new food sources: chickens and hogs. Choctaw men still primarily engaged in hunting, and the same roles of gender division remained largely undisturbed.²⁵ The actions of an unjust government forced Mississippi Choctaws into a crucible, and while it produced new adaptations, Choctaws were able to emerge with many of their customary ways of life intact.

Those who were fortunate enough to have received land grants settled into log cabins, and those of a little more means lived in wood-frame houses. In these homes, Choctaws made use of classical baskets and pottery, but also incorporated European-

²² Clara Sue Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle for Land and Identity in Mississippi, 1830-1918," *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 65.

²³ Satz, "The Mississippi Choctaw," 15.

²⁴ Satz, "The Mississippi Choctaw," 15-17.

²⁵ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 81.

manufactured wares into their routines. Access to European goods caused a significant decline in women's crafting of pottery and baskets for their own personal use.²⁶ However, women continued to make their cane baskets but began to sell them. This reinforced Choctaw identity while supplementing their income. By selling their baskets, women broke into the larger market economy in a visible way. Men, too, joined in this artistic market, making blow guns, tool handles and rabbit sticks to sell.²⁷ The difference in the men and women's place in the market was that men had long enjoyed a place at the front of Choctaw exchange. Choctaw women had formerly only produced the goods Choctaw men traded with. Women were only able to have an effect through influence. In this new market, Choctaw women held a place that was no longer behind the scenes. While customary gender roles in the world of work were for the most part upheld, there was room for flexibility as the economically diminished state of the Choctaws did not allow for them to be choosy. Choctaw men worked alongside women in the fields and selling crafts because they had to in order to survive.

An important change in the identity, social standing and lifestyle of the Choctaws occurred during Reconstruction with the freeing of black slaves. One of the most important distinctions between African-Americans and Indians, prior to the Civil War, was their freedom. With the removal of that distinction, there was little separating them on the social hierarchy, particularly in the minds of whites. Choctaws soon found themselves sharing a similar existence to freed blacks as sharecroppers.²⁸ Choctaws were not formally discriminated against in the same ways as African-Americans with the

²⁶ Rufus Ward, "Choctaw Farmsteads in Mississippi, 1830," *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 35.

²⁷ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 22.

²⁸ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 82.

institution of Jim Crow laws, but they were treated in everyday situations as socially inferior to whites.²⁹ This is why they often found themselves in poor economic situations that more closely resembled that of former slaves. During this time women continued the work they always had done, but with a stronger focus on remaining a separate group and not being lobbed in with those whom they considered to be lesser peoples, African-Americans. They worked and worshiped with other Choctaws. Separating themselves from African-Americans reinforced their Choctaw identity and made the statement that they were different.³⁰ Meanwhile, Choctaw men also became sharecroppers and took responsibility for signing contracts with white landowners, although they also continued to hunt and fish.

The Choctaws' determination to avoid classification as "colored" was manifested in 1882, with the creation of state-sponsored Indian schools. Choctaws were barred from entry into white schools, but they refused to let their children attend the African-American schools. Sending their children to African-American schools would have sent the message that they were submitting to the ideology of racial inferiority as defined by Jim Crow. In response to this, the Mississippi legislature created these Indian schools, and by 1893, there were eight Choctaw schools operating. Both boys and girls were allowed to attend, and though attendance was sporadic due to children having to work or a lack of appropriate clothing, they were able to be exposed to education in reading, math, English, history and geography. These schools taught lessons in both English and Choctaw. Most Choctaws sent their children to school, recognizing the value and

²⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 28.

³⁰ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 29.

opportunity that an education afforded. Adults even found their own uses for the schoolhouse, and in one community they formed a debating society to discuss practical, economic, business, philosophical and many more questions and issues. The Choctaw economy had shifted from an entirely subsistence-based economy to one that dealt in currency with a little subsistence farming. Education was an important tool needed to operate in the new economy. White Mississippians preferred dealing with Choctaws who seemed more assimilated to American culture, and education provided this, teaching Choctaws the English language and other useful skills.³¹

While some aspects of European and American culture such as ceramics and livestock made their way into the majority of Choctaws' lives, only a select few would incorporate further aspects of Europeanization into their way of living. These few were the highly acculturated, wealthy Choctaws whose lives came to resemble more closely their white neighbors than their Choctaw ancestors. This lifestyle was usually born of a marriage to a white man. One such Choctaw woman was the wife of Hartwell Hardaway. Hardaway, a white man, married her and they had a family together. They were far more affluent than the rest of the Choctaws, and during the negotiations at the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the commissioners sent by the U.S. government stayed in their home.³² Choctaw women, like Mrs. Hardaway, led an entirely different lifestyle from other tribal members, modeled on the sedentary lifestyle of well-off Euro-American women. They did not work in the fields, but tended to household affairs.³³ Examples of

³¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 32-35.

³² File: p. 1-220 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 13-15, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

³³ Satz, "The Mississippi Choctaw," 15-17.

these are such rarities that it is nearly impossible to call this in any way a Choctaw experience. These people left behind their cultural roots, and with their change in lifestyle came a change in their allegiance and identity. Eventually they merged with the larger white population.

At the turn of the century, the Choctaw Indians seemed to be stuck in this tug-of-war with the government. Once again, this time under the Dawes Commission, the federal government began organizing for the removal of even more Mississippi Choctaws to Indian Territory, which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. In 1903, they sent around three-hundred Mississippi and Louisiana Choctaws to the Choctaw Nation.³⁴ Then, in 1916 and 1917, after Congress heard reports of the poor conditions of living for the Choctaws they conducted a series of hearings and sent a special supervisor, John R. T. Reeves, to investigate and make a report on their conditions. Reeves reported back of their state, "The vast majority of them own nothing and are practically destitute, living in decrepit shacks and cabins that but indifferently afford protection against the elements."³⁵ After receiving his report Congress passed a bill granting recognition of the Mississippi Choctaw as an Indian tribe, and historian Clara Sue Kidwell notes that in doing so Choctaws were restored to their status before the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, as a federally recognized Indian tribe.³⁶

During these years, Choctaw women were still engaged in their crafting and subsistence-level farming that defined their work's history. One Choctaw woman, Lesa

³⁴ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 86-87; Charles Roberts, "The Second Choctaw Removal, 1903," *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*, ed. Samuel J. Wells and Roseanna Tubby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 94.

³⁵ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 88.

³⁶ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 89.

Phillip Roberts, later recounted the types of activities that she and her family members performed. Lesa remembered most men working as sharecroppers for local white farmers, while a few found work for timber and turpentine companies. She even remembered a very small number of men who continued to hunt and trap for work. Lesa recalled how the women and young girls who wove cane mats and baskets and sewed patchwork quilts. She said that these were then bartered to local shopkeepers or wives of white farmers.³⁷

With the death of Lesa's father and the timely arrival of the Dawes commission, her mother signed her family up for removal. Though in an entirely new place, Lesa found herself and others involved in the same kinds of economic activity that she participated in in Mississippi. Lesa told her granddaughter that when there was nice weather some of the former Mississippian Choctaws in Indian Territory would hire themselves out to local farmers to work the field picking cotton or do any other farm chores. Lesa's mother and older sister would go do this while she remained at the temporary camp to look after her younger siblings. And on some days Lesa was allowed to walk through the woods to pick blackberries and wild grapes and gather firewood. When her mother finally received a land grant, Lesa helped build their cabin, clear the farm land, and prepare a garden. When she was not farming their land, Lesa hired herself out to local farmers to help harvest. After marrying, Lesa fully stepped into the long-established role of a Choctaw woman. She prepared all of the meals, took care of the home and children, tended to the livestock, and worked on the farm. When her husband

³⁷ Charles Roberts, "A Choctaw Odyssey: The Life of Lesa Phillip Roberts" *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 14 (1990): 1-8.

died, the work only increased with her having to devote much more time to farm work.³⁸

While Lesa lived the majority of her life outside of Mississippi, she carried with her the cultural expectations of a Choctaw woman, and she lived her life and performed her work as well as any Mississippian Choctaw before her. Her life and her journey captured the toil and struggle of Choctaw women at the turn of the century.

Back in Jim Crow Mississippi, with the high tensions and feelings surrounding race, Choctaw women faced added pressure. This can be seen in the language used in what was supposed to be polite public society. In an advertisement that a white woman, Mrs. Arnold, put in the newspaper, a journalist relayed Arnold's sentiments writing, "Perhaps the most interesting thing about Indian baskets, Mrs. Arnold says is the fact that you can read in the weave of the basket the character of the Indian making it...The neat and careful Indian will make a basket that will 'make your mouth water.' Mrs. Arnold says while you may observe in a slovenly Indian's basket her particular kind of slovenliness."³⁹ Choctaw women were often subjected to this kind of racial demonizing in their work, and being labeled as the "slovenly" basket-weaver could cost a Choctaw woman her job and the income that she was depending on.

Basket-weaving was not an easy process, but for Choctaw women it was well worth the work. This craft began first with cutting cane to make the baskets. Cane grew best in wet and swampy areas and was best gathered in the fall. After cutting the cane, weavers used small, sharp knives to cut the top layer of cane into workable strips. From there, weavers dyed the cane to their color preference using natural dyes from berries and

³⁸ Roberts, "A Choctaw Odyssey," 1-8.

³⁹ "Choctaw Baskets Distributed From Cellar in Capital" *The Washington Post*, June 3, 1928, <file:///C:/Users/ehpep/Downloads/--Choctaw%20Baskets.%20Washington%20Post.%201928.pdf>.

other colorful plants. Only after all of that work could the weaver begin making the cane into a basket form.⁴⁰ Making baskets was an important pastime, but in their economic situation it was most important as a source of income. Choctaw women were not paid a lot for their work, but any extra money made it worth the effort. Basketry was laborious, but the continued demand for baskets allowed Choctaw women to stay in touch with their culture, heritage and roots. Basket-weaving was something nearly inherent to the identity of Choctaw women and continuing this practice reinforced Choctaw identity and allowed women to participate in their history.⁴¹

Before the onset of the Great Depression, there was work even Choctaw women would not deign to do. Though their own employment opportunities were limited, Choctaw women refused to do domestic household work, such as laundry, since they regarded it as the work of African-Americans.⁴² While jobs in manufacturing, retail, and professional employment were available right outside the Indian community, it was rare for Choctaw women to engage in any kind of work that was not related to agriculture. Choctaw historian Katherine Osburn notes, “Choctaws lacked education and language skills for retail jobs, and it was highly unlikely that a white-owned establishment would hire a person of color to interact with the public.”⁴³ Outside of agriculture there were only a few jobs available as teachers or preachers. Of course, Choctaw women were only allowed to teach in their segregated schools or religious ones.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ “Choctaw Baskets.”

⁴¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 105.

⁴² Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 61.

⁴³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62.

⁴⁴ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62.

Though much had changed in the hundred years since Removal, much of the work of Choctaw women was not too different from that of their great-grandmothers. Choctaws did not have kitchens, but instead cooked their meals over outdoor fires. The Choctaw diet had also not altered much with corn still acting as their staple food source. Choctaw meals largely consisted of this corn made into cornbread along with fish and the occasional supplementary meat source. Women still made clothes for their families mostly by hand, although a few were able to procure sewing machines.⁴⁵ But the influence and diffusion of American culture was clearly present on Choctaw homes and farms. Historian Samuel Proctor conducted an interview with Mary Lou Farmer, a Choctaw woman born in 1917, and she illustrated what life was like for her then. She remembered working as young as eight years old picking cotton, milking cows and feeding pigs. Her father was a sharecropper, and the family helped him on the farm. True to their Choctaw roots, her family still grew corn, but there were new, non-customary foodstuffs too, like peas and peanuts.⁴⁶ The biggest change in the Choctaw work structure was that men now worked predominately alongside women in the fields. Field and housework had long been the domain of Choctaw women, so for them life had not altered drastically. They had different bowls and a few new crops, but the work was not fundamentally different. The working world of men, however, represented a significant change. The work they would have once been ridiculed for doing was now their primary job.

⁴⁵ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62.

⁴⁶ Interview with Mary Lou Farmer, December 3, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 2-9.

With the economic downturn brought on by the Great Depression, the already taxing work it took to survive became a nightmare. The domestic work Choctaw women had once scorned was then taken on, as they laundered the linens of white women.⁴⁷ The Indian Service intervened to help the hungry Choctaw in this dangerous time. State and county employees worked to strengthen the subsistence farming and the longstanding barter economy of the Choctaw by bringing in home economists to help Choctaw women can foods, work the garden, raise poultry and refashion discarded bedding into reusable linens. Osburn explained that through all of this work:

Choctaws' home production helped alleviate hunger and cold, but it also called attention to Choctaw ethnicity. Choctaw women displayed canned goods, sewing projects, and baskets and beadwork at county fairs in community booths marked with distinctive Choctaw decorations.⁴⁸

Choctaw men found more help from the federal government in finding work than did Choctaw women, who were closed off to these opportunities. The Federal Emergency Relief Act gave industrial jobs to Choctaw men at the Sweet Potato Starch Plant, and others found work building roads for the Public Works Administration. Yet, most Choctaw men found themselves back in the fields working under the direction of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division. The realm of work possibilities for Choctaw women was viewed as a narrow street, and the U.S. Federal government kept that street small by focusing on creating more economic opportunities for Choctaw men.⁴⁹ There were a few opportunities available for women to work outside the home and farm. During the Depression years, Mary Lou Farmer found work as a nurse's aide

⁴⁷ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 103.

⁴⁸ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 105.

⁴⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 103-104.

at a local hospital. She would sweep and mop floors, make beds and bathe patients.⁵⁰

The occasional odd job, such as this, was available, and it provided a much better salary than basketry.

This expression of Choctaw identity became even more important as the Mississippi legislature saw an opportunity of marketing the Choctaw community as a one-of-a-kind tourist experience only to be found in Mississippi. They had plans to put Mississippi on the map as an exciting place to tour, and the Choctaws they had once tried to root out now provided another dimension to Mississippi, one that was marketable. The Choctaws suddenly popped up in advertisements of Mississippi as a must-see. They were depicted through many of the crafts of Choctaw women, like their beadwork and basketry. The Works Progress Administration published a guidebook of Mississippi in which it promoted the Choctaws as a novelty only to be seen and experienced in Mississippi. The same identity which was keeping Choctaw children out of white schools was now being celebrated as a landmark of state pride.⁵¹

Basket-weaving production declined at marked rates between 1935 and 1945, but for many Choctaw women there was more important work to be done at this time than basket-making. To make a living, women spent most of their days working, leaving little time for leisure activities.⁵² The home economics teachers were vexed at the disinterest in Choctaw girls to learn basket-weaving. Basketry was as much an economic endeavor as it was an artistic one. In the 1940s, the economy began to rebound, and basketry was

⁵⁰ Interview with Mary Lou Farmer, December 3, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 20.

⁵¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 105.

⁵² Interview with Callie Dixon, June 28, 1975, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1-3.

no longer the only way for Choctaw women to earn extra money. To combat this decline, the superintendent sent a Choctaw woman and a home economics instructor to North Carolina to learn how to make native dyes from the Cherokee Indians so they could better market the Choctaw baskets as authentic native works.⁵³ Choctaw women's crafts became vital to the state as a point of tourism attraction and thus revenue, and the state saw their continued creation as a worthy investment.

While Choctaw identity worked to the advantage of Choctaws in certain important ways, living in the post-Civil War South, life was not always easy for those of a darker skin tone. In a letter to the editor of a Mississippian newspaper, a newcomer to the area shared her view of Choctaw race relations. She wrote, "The Indians here are segregated as the Negroes and as deprived of their civil rights."⁵⁴ She went on to describe how their economic situation, too, was no better off than that of African-Americans. While the Choctaws were not subjected to as deep of a racial divide as blacks, they were, because of their belittled social standing, unable to combat the white supremacy that dominated their world. This was reflected as the observer noted in their homes and economic status.⁵⁵ Often this economic status was tied to the lack of job opportunities for Choctaws, especially Choctaw women. Choctaw women were barred from teaching in white schools in the same way their children were barred from attending them. Choctaw women were also denied jobs in customer service, where they would have to interact with white customers. Oftentimes, too, education played a major factor in the employment of Choctaw women. Few possessed the education and language skills

⁵³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 105.

⁵⁴ Arthur Geller, "Letters" *New York Times*, January 31, 1965.

⁵⁵ Geller, "Letters," 1.

necessary to perform a job in retail with English-speakers.⁵⁶ It was not uncommon for Choctaw families to still speak in their native Choctaw language after the turn of the century, and many families, even in 1976, preferred to speak Choctaw in their homes.⁵⁷ To combat these injustices and discrepancies, Choctaws remained committed to bettering education on their reservation. By 1930, in all of the Choctaw communities, elementary schools had been established. These schools were able to employ a few Choctaw women as teachers, but their importance was really found in establishing a firm educational foundation for successive generations of Choctaws.⁵⁸

After the Great Depression, the economy bounced back with the entrance of the United States into World War II. This and the institution of two new federal government programs helped to pull the Choctaws back from the precipice of hunger and malnutrition. A number of Choctaw men left to fight in the war, and women had to take over their place sharecropping. Choctaws, with the help of the Live At Home Program, the more successful of the two government programs, the other being the Food for Victory Program, were able to return to pre-Depression levels of subsistence farming. Choctaw women continued to supplement this income with their crafts or other jobs they could find.⁵⁹

In 1945, at the close of the war, the Mississippi Choctaws reorganized under the terms of the Indian Reorganization Act. The Choctaws reconstituted their tribal government, which had not functioned since Removal in 1830. The Tribal Council's new political status helped them as they applied to the federal government for aid and funds.

⁵⁶ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62.

⁵⁷ "Survey," *Choctaw Community News* vol. VII, number 11, December 17, 1976, 10.

⁵⁸ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 122.

⁵⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 132-133.

The council worked tirelessly for access to these funds and sought out economic endeavors with private companies, which helped the Choctaws recover in the post-war years.⁶⁰

The annual Choctaw Indian Fair first began in 1949, and here Choctaw women displayed and sold their handiwork. As the production grew, it brought in a greater revenue stream to individuals and the tribe. It created a niche for the Choctaw arts community and provided a larger revenue stream.⁶¹ Home economists helped many Choctaw women who were sharecropping start personal gardens to supplement their diet. If a white landowner objected to a private garden, the economists would then take on the role of activist and plead the case of the malnourished worker. During this time, it was often not possible for payments to be made in cash, and home economists helped the bartering process between Choctaw craftswomen and customers.⁶² Every venue of display provided another opportunity for Choctaw women to supplement their income, and every little bit mattered.

Choctaw women have always worked outside of the home in addition to their domestic duties. Conventionally it was in the fields, and this held true up to and throughout the early part of the twentieth century for many Choctaw women.⁶³ In the latter part of the twentieth century, Choctaw women, while still working as homemakers, moved towards more work that was not agriculture related. In a study looking at jobs, from 1962 to 1968, Choctaw women's employment in non-agricultural jobs rose from

⁶⁰ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 130-154.

⁶¹ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 128.

⁶² Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 104-105

⁶³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 104.

4.3% to 17.7%.⁶⁴ Even though the work was different, Choctaw women retained this balanced, dual sphere of domestic duties and work. Many of the jobs that women went on to take were extensions of their domestic duties. Choctaw women were hired as cooks and attendants in hospitals and housekeepers and kitchen assistants in schools, and the Choctaw tribal council encouraged and supported these women performing domestic duties in a work environment.⁶⁵ In 1961, Chief Martin reported on the well-being of Choctaw families in Mississippi. Those who were endeavoring in sharecropping were barely surviving, making only \$600 in a year.⁶⁶ In the 1958 Superintendent's report, an observer of this change noted, "the reason that the house is not clean, the dishes are not washed, the beds are not made, the children are not clean- the women have to work right by their husbands."⁶⁷ Women of the twentieth century had to work outside the home to support themselves and their families, just as their predecessors had done before them.

The 1970s found the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians as socially distinct as they had always been, but something changed. In Philadelphia, the Choctaws finally carved and created a home and a safe haven for themselves. The area had seen economic improvements with the opening of new businesses, the booming of the annual Choctaw Indian Fair, and the establishment of a high school. With economic developments underway, there was the promise of what was to come. It was not only an exciting time to be a young adult, but for many older adults there were new opportunities in the form of adult classes.⁶⁸ For the Choctaws, this was an exciting time of growth and prosperity.

⁶⁴ Peterson, "Assimilation, Separation, and Out-Migration," 1290.

⁶⁵ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 163-164.

⁶⁶ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 126.

⁶⁷ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 156.

⁶⁸ Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, Tribal Council, "*Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians: An Era of Change*," 1972, 20-22.

Chairman and later Chief Phillip Martin advocated for Choctaw self-determination, and part of his goal in achieving this was to develop the Choctaw economy. For Martin, self-determination removed the tribe from under the influence of the United States government, and allow them to make major decisions for themselves. He wanted the Choctaw tribe to pursue economic development and opportunities, not the U.S. government on their behalf.⁶⁹ True to his word, Martin approached industries and brought in important economic opportunities for his tribe. In 1977, Chief Phillip Martin worked out a deal with the Packard Electric Division of General Motors to open a wire harness plant on the Choctaw reservation, and by 1979, the plant was up and running.⁷⁰ Chief Martin, over the course of his thirty year-long chieftaincy, further secured self-determination and economic stability of the Choctaws.

Many of the industrial developments brought to the reservation opened up jobs for men, but the upturn in the economy of the tribe and federal funding had positive consequences for Choctaw women too. In an interview in 1973, Choctaw woman Louise Willis told of her experience going back to work on the reservation because of the new education and job opportunities available. Louise spent much of her childhood and early adulthood years moving around wherever her father needed to go for his job. She graduated from a junior college in Kansas, and then went to work as a telephone operator. However, she returned to her birthplace among the Mississippi Choctaws because of the New Careers Program. Under this program, Louise worked as an administrative trainee while working on her second associates degree. The program provided her with both a

⁶⁹ Interview with Phillip Martin, January 21, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 4-5.

⁷⁰ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 131-132.

job and an education, and at the end of the program she would be qualified to hold a supervisory position in a school, business or factory.⁷¹ The new and improved Choctaw economy benefitted men and women, providing them with more opportunities for education and employment.

A century and a half after removal, some Choctaw women's lives still followed the conventional path of home-making and child-rearing, while others worked in the public sphere and had little to do cultural patterns designating women's work. For most Choctaw women, farming had become a thing of the past. Small farming operations were replaced by large, mechanized farms, and prices, particularly cotton, dropped off significantly.⁷² Choctaw women could not support their families in their farming efforts, even at a subsistence-level, and this old form of women's work became obsolete. Traditionalist Choctaw women kept the home or worked, often from young ages, in the childcare sector, and went on to become teachers. Some, like Delaura Henry, bridged the gap between the old and the new. Henry was the first Mississippi Choctaw girl to attend a four-year university. After graduating from Mississippi State University, Henry returned to work at the Arts and Crafts Association on the Choctaw reservation.⁷³ Henry's job outside of the home and as head of a program reflected the modern changes that Choctaw women had accepted, while her desire to preserve Choctaw basketry and arts reflected her decision to perpetuate Choctaw culture. In various ways, Choctaw women of the 1970s balanced and blended their cultural values with the new world.

⁷¹ Interview with Louise Willis, December 4, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1-8.

⁷² Peterson, "Assimilation, Separation, and Out-Migration," 1288-1289.

⁷³ Interview with Delaura Henry, January 31, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1-4.

The end of the twentieth century held the promise of a brighter future and greater possibilities for all Choctaws, including Choctaw women. The booming economy was poised to grow and continue improving conditions of the Choctaws. Educational opportunities were well within arm's reach, and the job market was growing along with the economy. These new opportunities afforded Choctaw women choices and possibilities. Whether Choctaw women made the decision to get an education and leave or stay and work inside the home, women had braved the changes wrought by Euro-Americans and emerged the arbiters of their fate.

Domestic Roles

Long before the removal of the majority of the Choctaws to Indian Territory, Europeans had visited them in their southeastern homeland. On one such expedition, during the eighteenth century, a Frenchman described the average Choctaw home. He recorded that Choctaws resided in cabins built from wood posts held together by stretchy bands with mud walls. There were no windows in these cabins, and the door was somewhere between three and four feet tall. Cabins were covered in tree bark, some of cypress and some of pine. Holes between the gables allowed smoke from the fire made inside the house to escape. Inside the homes were beds raised about three feet off the ground. The Choctaws used animal skins for blankets. Another account from the same time period recorded a different style Choctaw home. This home was circular and built from clay, straw and grass. The roof was thatch, but nowhere in the roof was there an opening to let smoke out. However, it did have raised beds like the other home, and this eyewitness said this allowed them to store pumpkins and potatoes beneath them. In these homes with the earth serving as the floor, it was the job of the woman to pull weeds from the house about three times a year.⁷⁴

The Choctaw home was the domain of the woman, and in the time between 1830 and 1970, many changes to her home life occurred. Marriage and courtship, Choctaw matrilineal kinship, and the physical Choctaw home gradually assimilated to look like their Euro-American counterparts, and while not all of these changes benefitted Choctaw

⁷⁴ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 37-39.

women, they were still active decision-makers in this process, never fully gave up their autonomy. Inside the home, long-established domestic duties, like sewing, changed as technology developed and women varied the Choctaw diet with new foods introduced by their American neighbors. Like in all facets of their lives, the story of Choctaw women in the domestic sphere was one of persistence and adaptation.

Many of the Southeastern Indian tribes had similar practices and beliefs, including thoughts about gender and the male-to-female relationship. Like the Cherokees, the Choctaws had a matrilineal kinship system. Matrilineal kinship systems afforded women more rights and freedoms than bilateral kinship systems, dominated by the patriarchy. In both societies women had property rights over their home, clothing, jewelry and more.⁷⁵ For Choctaw women this meant that the home stayed within her family line. If a wife and husband were to die without leaving any children, their home would become the property of the wife's relatives.⁷⁶ Since the home was the wife's domain, Choctaw women took responsibility for its care and upkeep. Care of the home was just one of the many domestic responsibilities of Choctaw women.

One of the primary cultural practices of Choctaw women in the home was that of the cook. As part of their complementary gendered-work system preparing meals was always the task of the woman. The staple in any Choctaw woman's area to prepare food was corn. Women farmed this corn and cooked with it constantly.⁷⁷ There are a few different variations on the Choctaw origin story of corn, but each one clearly demonstrates the value of corn in Choctaw life and its connection with women. In the

⁷⁵ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 137.

⁷⁶ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 103.

⁷⁷ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 17.

first variation, a crow brought a single kernel of corn from across the ocean and gave it to an orphan girl. The girl planted and looked after the kernel until it grew, and thus, the Choctaw discovered corn. In the second variation, the crow once again dropped the kernel, and it was picked up by a child. The child brought the kernel to its mother to ask what it was. The mother told him it was corn, and she planted it.⁷⁸ In both stories it was the Choctaw woman who was responsible for the care of their staple crop.

Before a Choctaw woman could begin to cook, she had to prepare the corn. This required serious manual labor and time. She first had to fill her mortar almost completely full with dry shelled corn. To this, she added water, and mashed the mixture with a pestle. Crushing the corn like this would cause the husks to fall off the grains, and the woman would do this until the meal was of a fine consistency. Next, she poured the meal into a sifting basket the women weaved called an “ofko.” Once the husks were separated from the corn meal, then she finally began to cook. Favorite corn dishes of the Choctaw were hominy, ashcake, and cornbread.⁷⁹

In addition to cooking for her family, the Choctaw woman was expected to cook for visitors. When a visitor arrived to a Choctaw home, he would be welcomed by a male member of the household. After greetings were exchanged, usually the wife, or another female member of the household, offered the guest food. The Choctaws expected their guest to try at least some of everything that was brought to him. It would be impolite and

⁷⁸ File: 42 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁷⁹ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. The Choctaws as Farmers, pp. 19-28, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

offensive to the hosts if he did not.⁸⁰ Sharing a meal with a visitor transformed him into a guest, which brought him into their circle and protection of kinship. Thus, women played an important diplomatic role by cooking for visitors.

Women were also in charge of cooking for communal events such as the funerary feasts. The customary funeral rites of a Choctaw started with placing the deceased on a scaffold to decay. During the first few days the family mourned for their lost loved one. After the body had sufficiently decomposed, bone-pickers came and collected the bones to put in a box, burning the rest of the corpse. The bone-pickers painted the skull red and after another ceremony, placed the bones in the bone house. This funerary process was concluded with a big feast which the women of the Choctaw community catered.⁸¹ Feasts were important social gatherings which reinforced close communal ties. Choctaw women served their community and helped to strengthen these bonds by preparing the food. They were the backbone of events like this, and it was their handiwork that brought the community closer together.

Because preparing meals was reserved for Choctaw women, sometimes women accompanied hunting parties and cooked the animals killed on the excursion. The women dressed the animal skins, cooked the meat, and used the remaining parts of the body, such as the antlers, to make tools.⁸² Oftentimes if a husband killed a deer, he returned to camp and told his wife where the animal dropped instead of bringing it back

⁸⁰ File: 48 Halbert, H. S. Visiting Customs, pp. 1-2, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁸¹ File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Custom, pp. 1-10, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁸² Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 18.

himself. He did this because if he brought the deer back himself, he was required to share the meat with the rest of those present, but the wife was not required to do so.⁸³ There is no indication of why this was the case, but it certainly would have been to the man and woman's benefit to not have to share more meat, especially if they had many children to feed.

Because Choctaw women were the primary food preparers, many men did not know how to make a meal. This was a challenge men had to deal with pretty regularly because of other Choctaw beliefs concerning women's menses. Once a month, during menstruation, women quit their home and spent the remainder of their cycle in a cabin that was away from their town. During this time women hid themselves from the sight of men, not just their husband. The Cherokees, like the Choctaws, had similar belief systems and attitudes towards blood. Blood was considered to be a pollutant, which is why women had to hide themselves away. Contact with men was considered as spreading the pollution, and southeastern Indians viewed this a grave offense against their beliefs. If any misfortune fell upon their community, a man and woman who had breached the menses separation would have been blamed for the tragedy.⁸⁴ For this week, while she was sequestered away from home she was unable to cook for her family. This meant that her husband had to either cook for himself or eat with their neighbors.⁸⁵

Early Choctaw cooking spaces had little in the way of technology, and all of it was homemade. Every Choctaw woman had a wooden mortar and pestle in order to

⁸³ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. The Choctawws as Farmers, pp. 57-58, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁸⁴ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 29.

⁸⁵ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 115-116.

made corn meal. Additionally, they had the “ofko,” which they wove from river cane. Also, historically women made their own earthenware bowls from clay.⁸⁶ Another basket which might be seen in the food-preparing area or around the house was the “taphorhik” which was a small, woven basket. There were many different kinds of Choctaw baskets, each with their own name and function. These baskets were often dyed and woven into diamond patterns. Choctaw women also decorated their pottery, tracing geometric patterns of lines or circles into the wet clay before firing it. Because they did not have a kiln pots were hardened by covering them in bark and then setting the bark on fire.⁸⁷

In addition to cooking in her domestic life, a Choctaw woman bore the majority of the burden of child-rearing and was in a unique situation because of the structure of the Choctaw family. Within the Choctaw tribe there were iksas, and children belonged to the iksa of their mother. The law of Choctaw marriage required that a Choctaw marry into the opposite iksa. It was considered taboo to marry into one’s own iksa. Though a Choctaw male might be both a husband and father, he was not the guardian of his children. The maternal uncles were responsible for chastising their sister’s children. The Choctaw mother was unable to correct her son, but was his primary caregiver.⁸⁸ So, for Choctaw children their authority figures were their mother and uncle, not the father. For Choctaw boys, especially, the uncle was the man in charge and the one who they had to

⁸⁶ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. The Choctawws as Farmers, pp. 17-21, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

⁸⁷ File: 28 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Baskets and Pots, pp. 1-56, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

⁸⁸ File: 25 Halbert, H. S. District Divisions and Civil Government of the Choctaws, pp. 44-46, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

answer to. As a result of this kinship arrangement, Choctaw men held their sisters in high regard. European observers often found these relationships confusing since they contrasted with European notions of the family unit. They likened the position of a sister to that of a wife in their societies.⁸⁹ For Choctaw mothers, this arrangement meant that they relied more on their brothers as their partners in child-rearing than their husbands. Their family unit would more accurately be defined as a mother, her brother and the mother's children. The father was more of an accessory figure than a primary one. Ultimately, this gave the woman and her kin more authority and decision-making power over the raising of children.

The gendered division of labor was taught to Choctaw children at an early age. Although parents did not castigate their children according to Choctaw custom, the father and uncle took charge of the son's education, while the mother taught her daughter. The Choctaw father taught his son how to operate a blow gun, shoot a bow, hunt, fish, clear land and more. The Choctaw mother instructed her daughter in both field and domestic work. She showed her daughter how to gather firewood, keep up a fire in the home, prepare and cook various recipes, mold clay earthenware, weave baskets, and make clothes. She might even learn the more difficult work of sewing men's girdles and garters.⁹⁰

Though women played different roles in their community, there is no evidence showing that men disparaged the work women did. Their work was vital to the

⁸⁹ Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 46.

⁹⁰ File: 30 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Domestic Government, pp. 46-49, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

community, and it was demonstrated in another origin story regarding women's domestic and field activities. In this origin story the Choctaws told how the sewing thread and crow came to be. There was a woman who convinced her husband to take their family to visit a hunter who lived some distance away. They took their son and went to the hunter's cabin. He was out, but his sister was home. The woman lied to the sister, telling her that her husband was in fact her brother. She made up this story about how he was going to marry soon and she and her son would be left alone. The sister planned for the woman to marry her brother, the hunter, when he returned. This took place, but the next morning they all discovered that the wicked woman had tricked them all. By then, the woman had given birth to a son with her new husband, and he had grown up overnight. Her first husband took their son and left. The hunter left, too, upon discovering her deceit. The two women lived together for some time, but one day the sister threatened her. She went out crying when her son came up to her. He killed the hunter's sister for his mother. Then, the woman decided she no longer wanted to live and they should both die together. When the mother killed herself, she turned into an old, mean crow, and the son became sewing thread.⁹¹ This story was important as a legend, because it showed that women's work was an important topic of conversation. Crows were nuisances to women's work since they ate the corn that women so carefully cultivated, and this story showed how they came to be. Sewing thread helped Choctaw women make clothes, and this story told how this tool also came into their lives. Women's work both inside and outside the home was looked at, appreciated and analyzed through story.

⁹¹ File: 42 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

Courtship and marriage were important features of the domestic sphere for a Choctaw woman at many points in her life. For a young woman, it meant finding a husband, and for her mother it meant ensuring a good match. We do not know how many women were attracted to their same sex or how that situation was handled, but it is safe to assume that not all Choctaw women were heterosexual. There was mention of gay men in the Choctaw community by Jean Bernard Bossu, an eighteenth century French explorer, who wrote that male concubines wore their hair long and a short skirt, mimicking the dress of Choctaw women.⁹² All we have regarding Choctaw courtship and marriage practices, however, are accounts of heterosexual couples.

Before Removal the young male suitor initiated the courting process by approaching the maternal uncles of the girl he had fixed his sights on to let them know of his intentions. If the uncles agreed to the match, he next had to let the girl know. He visited her home, and during the conversation slyly slid a pebble over to her. If she accepted him, she sent the pebble back to him, but if not, she made a very obvious frown. Then, a signal was given and the girl raced from her cabin to a pole. If the girl was caught by her suitor before reaching the pole, she would be his wife. If this is what she wanted she would allow him to catch her. However, if she changed her mind, she tried to get to the pole before being caught, and she would not have to marry him. If she was overtaken, regardless of her change of mind, she had to marry him. After the chase, a wedding date would be set.⁹³ So, while Choctaw girls did not initiate engagement proceedings, they had a say so in their future husband. They could clearly refuse him if

⁹² Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 111.

⁹³ File: 15 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 1-6 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

they wished to, and there was nothing he could do about it. Choctaw women had a voice equal to that of men when it came to choices about life. The home was the woman's castle, and she got to choose who to share it with.

The engagement then secured and the wedding date set, all the women had left to do was to cook for the wedding day. The wedding was usually scheduled for the afternoon, and both families came with many relatives and an abundance of food. To begin the ceremony, brothers and male cousins of the bride walked over to the groom and took him to the chosen spot where they set out a blanket. He seated himself, then his female cousins sat the bride-to-be beside him. Both families gave the couple bags of provisions. Then, the groom's friends and relatives placed presents on the bride's head, such as clothing, money, trinkets, and ribbons. The bride's female relatives came and grabbed the presents. After the presents were gone, the male relatives and sometimes a few old kinswomen shook the groom's hand. Occasionally at this point an elderly man gave a congratulatory speech. The wedding ceremony concluded, the feast began. Following the feast there was a dance, and the next morning everyone headed home, the couple included. For a while, the newlyweds lived with their respective parents and visited each other.⁹⁴ Eventually, they established their own home. These gift-giving cultural practices showed that Choctaw men valued their brides, and knew that they were co-opting a valuable asset from her family. It was also important that he gave gifts to her female family members, because it showed that he respected them and wished to join into their kinship network. The Choctaws had a matrilineal kinship system, so it was the

⁹⁴ File: 15 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 7-12 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

husband who was joining the family more so than the bride joining his family. The types of gifts given, though small, were valuable to Choctaw women. Beads, clothing and ribbon were all coveted commodities, and these would have been considered fine presents. It was also noteworthy that newlyweds were in no rush to move into a home of their own. Choctaw communities were tight-knit networks, and family was very important. By not moving out immediately and far away, Choctaw men and women demonstrated their desire to maintain these close connections with their families and iksas.

Many Choctaw women did not venture far outside of their community. Their work caring for children and farming kept the majority of them close to home.⁹⁵ However, the lines separating gender were often not as strict as they seemed. Some women chose to accompany men on the war path. Usually they were married women who went to fight alongside their husbands. These women used the same weaponry as men, owning their own gun and ammunition.⁹⁶ So, while duties between men and women were prescribed separately, there was fluidity to cross those boundaries. This ability to stay at home or venture out with the Choctaw warriors proved that women were agents of their own destiny. They were not confined to rigid gender definitions, but could make for themselves the life they wanted.

⁹⁵ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. The Choctaws as Farmers, pp. 15, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁹⁶ File: 39 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw War Customs and Wars, pp. 13, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

In 1830, the Choctaw nation ceded their land to the United States government in the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. The treaty provided under Article 14 that Choctaws could choose to remain in Mississippi.⁹⁷ Over the following three years, from 1831 to 1833, there were three massive emigrations of Choctaws from Mississippi westward. In a report from the Secretary of War to the President, in 1833, it was estimated that approximately 15,000 Choctaws had emigrated from Mississippi in those three years.⁹⁸ This was a massive change for the Mississippi Choctaws. In addition to Removal, there were other changes taking place during that same time. The Choctaws who stayed faced dispossession of their homes because of corrupt commissioners⁹⁹ Also, Christianizing efforts were sweeping through the Mississippi Choctaws. In 1830, it was estimated that there were around 2,000 Christian Choctaws.¹⁰⁰ Although their world was fraught with changes, many of the activities of daily life for Choctaw women did not change. In this chaotic time, Choctaws clung to their identity, remaining a group separate from the white Mississippians who surrounded them.¹⁰¹

By the 1830's Choctaw homes looked different than their old clay buildings. Wealthier Choctaws lived in wood-frame homes, while poorer Choctaws lived in log

⁹⁷ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, pp. 1-5, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁹⁸ File: 90 Halbert, H. S. Exploring Delegation, 1830- The Three Government Emigrations, 1831, 1832, 1833, pp. 52, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-2167, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

⁹⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ File: 90 Halbert, H. S. Exploring Delegation, 1830- The Three Government Emigrations, 1831, 1832, 1833, pp. 52, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-2167, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁰¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 21.

cabins.¹⁰² The log cabins were two rooms and were similar to the homes of whites of the same economic status. Choctaws adopted the styles of their white neighbors as more and more American settlers moved into Mississippi. These homes were sparsely furnished, the sitting room having usually one or two stools. Choctaw women had a few more tools and dishes in their food area, including a pot, a kettle and a few tin cups.¹⁰³ Choctaw women had acquired some of these goods since trade first opened with Europeans, but by this time they had built up their collections of European wares. Most Choctaws were not wealthy, and it took time to accumulate these goods. Their food-preparing area, full of European wares, showed that even at this early stage, many women were abandoning making their own pots and pans. Choctaws were becoming more and more dependent on European goods, and they established a steady trade with whites. Choctaws moved to sleeping on pallets on the floor instead of their former raised beds, and some new Choctaw homes had a table and a couple of chairs. Choctaws also began buying English pottery and making their own gradually fell out of fashion.¹⁰⁴

Though Choctaw women had acquired new cooking tools, they still made the same favored, customary recipes. During the negotiations of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek the U.S. commissioners dined with prominent Choctaw chiefs, and the most skilled cooks of the Choctaw women prepared the food for their dinners. They baked their breads, cooked venison and, of course, made hominy.¹⁰⁵ Choctaw women

¹⁰² Ward, "Choctaw Farmsteads," 34.

¹⁰³ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Ward, "Choctaw Farmsteads," 34-35.

¹⁰⁵ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, pp. 13-18, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

welcomed new technology and other advancements from their white neighbors, but in their cooking can be seen the enduring attachment to Choctaw culture and identity.

Even in the early twentieth century, the common Choctaw birthing practices were still ongoing. When a woman was about to go into labor, she left her cabin and found a secluded spot in the woods. There, unassisted, she gave birth, bathed her newborn and return home. European kinship systems had not supplanted the old Choctaw system. Mothers were still responsible for the care and maintenance of children, and maternal uncles served as guardians. If the Choctaws had to make a journey, it was the responsibility of the mother to carry the baby on her back. Mothers, also, breastfed their children for years. They did not wean the child off, but only stopped when the child decided it was time. Often mothers would breastfeed even up to the age of four. Choctaws were not wealthy, and prolonged breastfeeding provided young children with nutrients they would not otherwise acquire. Prolonged breastfeeding, by suppressing fertility, may have also helped Choctaw women space out their children. Choctaw parents still adopted relations and orphans. The Choctaw mother did not treat the adopted child any differently than her biological one.¹⁰⁶

The marriage ceremony itself had not altered much from the customary way, but the festivities of the day changed and varied even further from wedding to wedding.

There was not a certain order of events that had to take place at any certain time.

Courtship practices changed as well. The young couple who wished to be engaged only

¹⁰⁶ File: 34 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Marriage Customs: Maternity, Punishment of Adultery, pp. 31-38, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

sometimes pushed pebbles at one another to indicate interest, and the chase to the pole was no longer observed by the end of the nineteenth century. Changes to the courtship process were affected by a variety of factors. The growth of Christianity among the Choctaws was one of the contributing factors, as well as general white American influences. The custom fell out of fashion, and it became an antiquated cultural practice. The uncle was still approached by the young, male suitor, but he brought a gift for the uncle, in addition to asking to marry his niece. This gift could take various forms, from a hog to ten yards of cloth. If the girl did not have a maternal uncle, this gesture was extended to her brothers.¹⁰⁷ Gift giving practices shifted from the female relatives' purview into the male relatives' domain. Patriarchal Euro-American gender ideas began to replace Choctaws' matrilineal kinship system. Choctaw women's place was not entirely supplanted by men, but their authority was diminished.

The female relatives prepared the wedding feast the night before and the day of, as was customary. Before the marriage ceremony began, there was a chase where the bride with the help of her female relatives ran from the male relatives of the groom. After the bride was caught, they all returned to the cabin. The bride would sit on a blanket or animal skin and the groom's party covered her with gifts, which her female relatives snatched. After this, the bride was taken to the room where the groom was and everyone would eat. The ceremony took all day, and the groom stayed the night. Before sunrise he headed home, and later that morning the bride, accompanied by her friends, went to his home. She was greeted by his mother and sisters who gave her presents from

¹⁰⁷ File: 15 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 1-2 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

the groom. She also received presents from other close family members. The bride had to demonstrate her cooking abilities before returning home. When night fell, the groom went to stay with the bride permanently. Even up to this point, Choctaws still observed the matrilineal kinship system. Men went to live in the homes of their wives, not the other way around. While there were many changes to the Choctaw marriage ritual, some older customs were still preserved in the community. Only some Choctaw mothers adhered to this particular custom, but it called for the mother-in-law to never look directly upon her new son-in-law. They tried to avoid one another, but if they absolutely had to talk they would place a screen between them.¹⁰⁸ This helped reduce friction among in-laws and contributed to domestic harmony.

During the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the culturally-established domestic roles for Choctaw women persisted, but what each role looked like underwent important changes. Along with this cultural change came even more significant challenges for the Mississippi Choctaw Indians. In 1903, there was once again a large removal of the Choctaws westward. In 1903, the Dawes commission enrolled 2,335 Choctaws, however, many resisted so this is a little lower than the true number. After this new removal, the 1910 census revealed there were only 1,253 Choctaws in Mississippi.¹⁰⁹ This removal severely depleted the Choctaw community in Mississippi, and played a large factor in the changes that resulted after 1903. It took the Mississippi Choctaws a while to rebuild their population and institutions.

¹⁰⁸ File: 15 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 1-2 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

¹⁰⁹ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 86-87.

The matrilineal kinship system and longstanding domestic rule were completely subverted. By 1913, the matrilineal kinship system disappeared entirely, and many Choctaw contemporaries believed that they had always had a bilateral kinship system. This myth was born of the influence of Christian missionaries and the American bilateral kinship system. Both of these pressures extolled the father's place as head of the household, and relegated the wife to an auxiliary position. While mothers still held priority over fathers, their control of property was taken from them. In 1909, when a husband and father died, the couple's property was transferred to his brothers, and the mother and her family were entrusted with the care of the children. Maternal uncles were no longer the guardians of their sister's children, but the father of the children became the guardian. The new Choctaw kinship system closely resembled that of their white neighbors, and it was no coincidence.¹¹⁰

Largely due to the dwindling numbers of Choctaws in Mississippi, the Choctaw law of marriage, whereby one could not marry into his or her own *iksa*, broke down. It became the job of the elders in the community to watch the young people and make sure inappropriate attachments were not forming. The Choctaws would not let anyone marry within four degrees of relation, same *iksa* or no. They even hesitated to let fifth cousins marry, only allowing the match if other, more suitable choices could not be found.¹¹¹ There were other threats to Choctaw domestic life from outside the tribe. Even before the late nineteenth century, white men had married Choctaw women. It had become an accepted practice, and these white men were adopted into the tribe.¹¹² They even held

¹¹⁰ Charles Madden Tolbert, "A Sociological Study of the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1958), 143-144.

¹¹¹ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 135.

¹¹² Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 129-130.

important duties as tribal members, such as Hartwell Hardaway, a white man married to a Choctaw woman, who hosted the commissioners during the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek.¹¹³ However, not all of these white men had honorable intentions, but sought to use Choctaw women as a way to gain access to land. In 1899, the New York Times ran an article detailing exactly how to take part in the scam:

The price for a Choctaw license for an intermarriage is \$100, but the thrifty whites who wed Choctaws will receive 550 acres of land apiece as dividends upon their investments. It is estimated that every one of the 16,000 Indians of that tribe will get that amount of land, so that impecunious whites have no trouble in borrowing the price of a marriage license by pledging their prospective allotments.¹¹⁴

This particular article was focusing on how men were taking advantage of the Choctaw Nation, in the West, but the same problems were shared by the two sister nations.

By this time in the Mississippi Choctaws history, there was a great deal of variation in courtship and marriage practices. Courtship might still be pursued by pebble pushing, but there also developed the trend of a male suitor placing his hat or handkerchief on the girl's bed to indicate his interest. Some weddings might see the bride break loose in the middle of the conventional Choctaw ceremony, and a chase ensued.¹¹⁵ With the spread of Christianity amongst the Choctaws, however, sometimes Choctaw ceremonies were omitted entirely. Instead, a minister or justice of the peace conducted a "legal marriage."¹¹⁶ In the 1880s the first Catholic Choctaws of Mississippi were married

¹¹³ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, pp. 13-15, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹¹⁴ "Seeking Choctaw Brides: White Men Anxious to Share in the Allotment of Indian Lands," *New York Times*, September 11, 1899, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)*, 1.

¹¹⁵ Henry S. Halbert, "Courtship and Marriage Among the Choctaws of Mississippi," *The American Naturalist*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Mar., 1882) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2449094> ., 223.

¹¹⁶ Tolbert, "A Sociological Study of the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi," 148.

in the church. The bride observed the usual customs of a Christian bride, wearing a white dress, a white veil, being married in a church. The church was filled with flowers and candles, and the wedding mass was sung.¹¹⁷ There was not a right or wrong way for a Choctaw couple to get married. A marriage not being considered legal by American standards was of little importance to them.

In addition, courtship had changed because of the father acting as guardian over his daughter, instead of his wife's brother. Courting often took place at community events. When the advances of a young Choctaw man had been accepted, after the next hunt the boy brought her mother what he had killed. Then, his father would find out who the young lady his son was interested in was and tell his wife. His wife would go visit her mother and they would make an agreement and set a wedding date.¹¹⁸ This illustrated how kinship ideas still played an important role in marriage decisions, even though ideas of matrilineality and *iksas* faded. Although fathers had become important figures in match-making, women held on to their position as decision-makers, too.

In their role as meal makers Choctaw women continued to cook for their families and also for the community during big or important events. Choctaw funerary rites evolved along with the rest of the changing tribal customs. In the late nineteenth century, the deceased were buried soon after death. Bone houses and bone-pickers were a thing of the past. White American notions of disposing of dead bodies, as well as Christian funerary ideals played a part in the demise of bone houses. Yet, some earlier ideas

¹¹⁷ File: 12 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Catholic Mission, pp. 6-7, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹¹⁸ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 134.

persisted. Some Choctaws continued to believe that the deceased stayed around for four days after death, so women would cook and place food on the grave for the deceased to eat. During these mourning days, a fire was kept constantly burning. If it was a husband who passed away, the wife sat by the fire all night, and if it was a child who died the mother did this as well.¹¹⁹ Women also continued the custom of preparing the wedding feast, but they added new dishes to their menu. In addition to their classic dishes of beef and bread they added coffee, pudding and pie.¹²⁰ Contact with white Americans, especially in the landowner-sharecropper relationship added these new dishes to the Choctaw diet.

Harkening back to their origin story, women were still responsible for making and sewing clothes for the entire family. This was still predominately done by hand; only a few women were able to own sewing machines. Even working as they did, it was not often that a family had all the clothing they needed. It was hard to find work as a Choctaw Indian, and Choctaws lived well under the poverty line. Most Choctaws lived in run-down shacks, and women cooked meals outside over an open fire because they did not even have a kitchen. In each individual Choctaw community, the death rate was higher than the birth rate. Conditions were unsanitary, and disease spread quickly through their communities.¹²¹ Like many other facets of the domestic sphere, raising children in this climate did not follow a regular routine. There were many changes coming to the Choctaws in the form of technology, customs, religion and education. By

¹¹⁹ File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Custom, pp. 14-20, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹²⁰ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 132.

¹²¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62-63.

1890, both the Baptist and Catholic churches had established schools for Choctaw children. Children were not able to go to school regularly because they were needed to help work. A Catholic teacher noted that attendance was spotty until the cotton picking was done. After that, children attended in a regular fashion.¹²² Choctaws were eager to have their children educated in these schools, but this opportunity came to an abrupt stop after the second Removal. As Choctaw children moved into more formal education, different skill sets and priorities displaced older value systems. Choctaw mothers used to be responsible for the education of their children, especially their daughters. Mothers taught them survival and life skills, but school focused on more cerebral studies, which challenged the authority of Choctaw mothers.¹²³ Some missionaries emigrated west with the Choctaws, and in other cases the numbers were so diminished that schools were forced to close.

The mid-to-late twentieth century domestic life of Choctaw women reflected both the enormous changes that the tribe underwent, but also showed the strength of their Choctaw cultural roots. The Choctaw family unit was fully assimilated into the patriarchal framework by the 1950s. The father had the utmost authority concerning family matters, and he was more present in helping his wife in child-rearing. This kinship system reversal was directly linked to important changes in the Choctaw communities. Christian missionaries had established many churches by this time, which directed Choctaw fathers to assume the role as the leader of the family unit. White

¹²² File: 12 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Catholic Mission, pp. 3-5, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹²³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 33.

Mississippians already organized their family structures in this way, and Choctaws adopted their technological advancements and family structures.¹²⁴

By mid-century, the majority of the Mississippi Choctaws were Christianized, but in some communities, they still performed Choctaw wedding ceremonies. These were reminiscent of conventional ceremonies, but were ultimately different. In latter twentieth century weddings, everyone who was invited had to bring some kind of food, even the men. Popular foods like hominy and breads were still served, but there were new additions like canned beans and sweet biscuits. A man presided over the ceremony, and he told guests what was going to happen. The bride and groom and their relatives came out, dressed in classical Choctaw garb. The bride and groom would sit in two chairs beside one another, instead of animal skins or blankets, which were the customary instrument. Then, the bride was given gifts of ribbon and handkerchiefs by the male's relatives, placed on her head. Then the bride's family came over and shook the groom's hand. The bride's relatives who had been cooking during this ceremony came over and took the gifts off the bride and returned to cooking. By this point, many Choctaws obtained a marriage license in addition to this ceremony to make the union legal in the eyes of the state.¹²⁵

One of the long-established domestic jobs of the Choctaw woman fell swiftly into disuse by the 1970s, and that was sewing and making clothes for the Choctaw family. In 1974, there were only a few people in each Choctaw community still sewing the Choctaw

¹²⁴ Tolbert "A Sociological Study of the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi," 158.

¹²⁵ Interview with Louise Willis, December 4, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 9-12.

clothes that marked their identity.¹²⁶ The economic status of Choctaws had greatly improved by then, and they were able to afford store-bought clothing. This clothing reflected the tastes of white America, and customary Choctaw women's clothes were not mass produced and sold in stores. The affordability and availability of clothing pushed Choctaws, in particular the younger generations, closer to assimilation. Customary Choctaw dress was worn on special occasions, like the Choctaw Indian Fair. In one of their fair pamphlets, a Choctaw man explained that the conventional clothing was called "regalia," demonstrating the break between old and new.¹²⁷ Choctaws reclassified their old garb as a clothing only worn in remembrance of a time past.

Other major changes that affected the domestic duties of Choctaw women in this period were due to the formalization of education in the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. The Pearl River High School was established in 1963.¹²⁸ After Choctaw women graduated high school, many wanted to continue to pursue higher education at the junior and senior college level.¹²⁹ Choctaw women in the workplace had become more important than fostering a homemaker. Formal education replaced the education Choctaw girls once received that prepared them to be a wife and mother. This shift in focus also had to do with the different environments faced by Choctaw women of the eighteenth century and the twentieth century. Women could no longer support their families as

¹²⁶ Interview with Delaura Henry, January 31, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 7.

¹²⁷ File: Choctaw Indian Fair 1950-1969, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹²⁸ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 124.

¹²⁹ Interview with Delaura Henry, January 31, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 9.

subsistence farmers, as they could in pre-Removal times. As women had to focus more on their work, their customary domestic duties became less important.

By the 1970s, and with the changes to courtship practices, Choctaw women began to take a more active role in their own marriage arrangements. While Choctaw women had always been able to say yes or no to potential marriage partners, they could not date these potentials to get to know them. In an interview with Louise Willis, in 1973, Louise explained how courtship and marriage for women of her generation had changed. They did not feel beholden to conventional modes of matchmaking and propriety. Louise stated that she dated many guys, regardless of this disappointing her grandfather. She pointed out that it was important to keep and observe some of the Choctaw customs and cultures, but did not feel beholden to keep them all.¹³⁰ Choctaw women, like Louise, were consciously changing their cultural concepts of courtship to fit with their modern understanding of marriage. They understood the importance of cultural practices, but they also understood that many practices had to be retired as things changed. This change in courtship customs was actively pursued by Choctaw women.

The Choctaw gendered division of work which put women in charge of domestic affairs worked well for the early Choctaw society. It allowed for the workload to be shared between the sexes. It fit the time frame in which it functioned. That domestic sphere grew and changed because the environment outside of it evolved as well. There are still many threads of history, pride and familiarity which connect the Choctaw woman of the eighteenth century with the Choctaw woman of the twentieth century. Both

¹³⁰ Interview with Louise Willis, December 4, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 20-21.

women are active in raising children, cooking favored recipes with corn, taking care of their families and celebrating the Choctaw way of life. Choctaw women have been adaptable, changing with their times but never losing sight of their identity.

Leadership

For the Mississippi Choctaws, leadership came in different forms and from different places. The two most important institutions that determined the direction of the tribe were the tribal government and religion. Choctaw women were often excluded from direct positions of power, but found means to exercise influence. Through changing governments and the Christianization of the Choctaws, women managed to play an important and active role in the direction of their lives. In the twentieth century, the efforts of women to make their voices heard were realized when they earned a place as part of the Choctaw Tribal Council.

The conventional Choctaw cosmology posited that religion was involved in every part of a Choctaw's life, which made the religion integral to all decisions. There were two main Choctaw origin stories, with subtle variations on each, but they both acknowledge their connection to a higher power. The first story tells of the Nanih Waiya mound giving birth to the Choctaw people. They were born from the earth as a loved and favored people to their most important god. The Great Father Aba, the sun, then dried them out and gave his divine law. He separated the Choctaw into two iksas, gave more laws concerning relationships, marriage and so on, left a sacred fire and finally, returned to the sky. The Choctaw believed they were the people of the sun god and should live around the mound from which they were born.¹³¹ This story fostered a strong feeling of connection to their Mississippi homeland.

¹³¹ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 8.

The second Choctaw origin story began with the Choctaw living in a place far to the west beyond the mountains. A medicine man led them away from there carrying with him a red pole. When he camped at night he planted the pole in the ground. When he awoke, he headed in the direction it was leaning towards. Every morning he awoke he found the pole leaning to the east, and the Choctaws had to keep going until the pole stood upright. When the pole stood upright, this meant that, they had reached the place the Great Spirit wanted them to stay. When they got to the place called Nanih Waiya, the large earthen mound, the pole stood up straight, and that was where they made their home.¹³² While they are two completely different stories both show the Choctaw belief in the spiritual world playing a determinative role in their lives. For women, the first story in particular shows the important position mothers held in Choctaw beliefs. It was the mound, Nanih Waiya, that birthed them into existence. This belief showed the intimate connection that Choctaws felt with the earth. They viewed the earth as a mother figure and respected her as such. Both stories demonstrate the importance of the land and surrounding Nanih Waiya to all Choctaw tribal members. They believed that the land was chosen specifically for them, and that was where the Great Spirit wanted them to live.

The Choctaws believed the sun god was the most important and powerful god in their cosmology, but he was not thought of as a “supreme being” until Christian missionaries introduced that idea. The sun god was thought of as a judge, someone who accomplished tasks, one with great power and a father figure. The distinction of the sun as a father figure was particularly important for the Choctaws, who had a matrilineal

¹³² Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 10.

kinship system. In their family organization, the father was not a direct authority figure. He was important in a Choctaw child's life, but he was there to spoil them, give them gifts and teach them fun things. He did not handle disciplining the child. So, the sun was conceived in a similar way to this definition of a father. The sun provided for his people. He provided warriors the ability to find the "bright path" which ended with a victory and safe return home. In this cosmological system people's actions had consequences. If crops went too long without rain the lustfulness of the youth might be blamed as the cause of it.¹³³

An important part of the Choctaw cosmology was keeping their world free from pollution. It was believed that such contamination resulted from people in transitional states, like women during their menstruation. Blood was a life force, and if not handled with caution, it could cause pollution. To keep this contamination from happening women would separate themselves from their community during this time. There was a hut away from the village built specifically for this purpose. This time away, too, was ritualized. In order to keep pure, a woman had to light a new fire once she entered the hut. If she transferred fire from her home to this place she risked pollution. During this time, men also had to keep away from women in this condition. If they did not, the Choctaws believed they would be vulnerable to illness and unfortunate in battle.¹³⁴

Healers, or doctors, were greatly esteemed by the Choctaw because of their knowledge and their ability to treat illnesses. Doctors were both men and women, and

¹³³ File: 13 Halbert, H. S. Indian Religious Beliefs, pp. 1-8 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹³⁴ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 20.

they were treated with equal regard. These Choctaw healers practiced herbal medicine. They mixed different combinations of herbs and roots to treat various ailments. Fevers called for one mixture, and sores called for another concoction. For example, doctors used cold baths and suction to draw out pains, but applied an herbal remedy to an open wound or sore. Their work was important because it was life-saving. The healers had treatments for rattlesnake bites and other reptilian attacks.¹³⁵ This was one of the few positions for women outside of the domestic and agricultural world. It also showed that the gendered division of labor was not strict. This was a job that both men and women could do, and it gave women respect and power within the community.

Similar to the healers but not to be confused with them, were medicine men. This art of healing was about religion and the spiritual world, not the natural world. The mantle of “medicine man” was indeed reserved for men only. Choctaw women only aided medicine men by giving out his medicine to sick women. Choctaw belief required women be given medicine by other women, and so the only position for Choctaw women in this domain was as a medicine-giver.¹³⁶ Conjurers claimed to have special powers of discernment and understanding of the natural world. They were there to cure a measles epidemic or help with marital problems. An early traveler among the Choctaw wrote of a medicine man he encountered:

The Medicine Man professed an insight into the hidden laws of Nature; he professed a power over the elements, the fish of the waters and the animals of the land; he could cause the fish to suffer themselves to be caught voluntarily, and give success to the hunter by depriving the denizens of the forest of their natural fear of man...¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 226.

¹³⁶ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 235.

¹³⁷ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 227-228.

There was no problem outside their realm of work, because they were not just healers of the body. They claimed to be driving forces in the natural world.¹³⁸ Although Choctaw women could not possess the power of medicine men, they still had a role in this world of medicine.

The other leadership avenue was in the Choctaw government. A French explorer reported on the makeup of this Choctaw governmental body. Each Choctaw village had a chief, an assistant chief, a war chief and then men below him who the explorer likened to lieutenants. The assistant chief set meetings, and he was usually in line to become the next village chief.¹³⁹ Within these established positions, there was not a formal place for women, so Choctaw women had to work outside of these strictures. Choctaw women held a prized place in the hearts of their brothers and sons, according to their kinship organization. Through these kinds of familial connections, women could influence and persuade their male family members to be their mouthpiece. Women's capacity to voice their own opinions was severely limited, but women worked around this obstacle in indirect ways.

Gifts were an important part of conducting tribal business. For the Choctaws, it was not about amassing wealth, it was about establishing a relationship through reciprocity. This was seen in the early relationship of the French and the Choctaw. The gifts brought by the French established the beginnings of an alliance. Chiefs also used this system of gift-giving to establish their authority. In doing so, the chief reminded both the French and his village that he controlled the flow of goods between the people

¹³⁸ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 183.

¹³⁹ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 90-91.

and the French. Fostering this relationship also worked to the chief's advantage. Having a trade relationship with the French built up the reputation of the chief.¹⁴⁰

In this gift-giving system, women also exerted backdoor influence. Choctaw women were the manufacturers of many of the trade goods that Choctaws used in these interactions. Women grew the corn and prepared the deer skins that were used as the Choctaws' gifts. Meals that were prepared and offered to the Europeans were also made by the women. Being the producer gave women an important position of influence in these trade deals. Women told the men what items they wanted from the Europeans, and Choctaw men complied. For example, in 1721, Choctaws purchased a foot of European cloth with four dressed deer hides. It was certainly not the men who wanted or needed the cloth, but Choctaw women who had them make the purchase on their behalf.¹⁴¹

The negotiations of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, in 1830, provided an excellent look into the Choctaw political body at work. This treaty negotiation was as much an event as it was a series of meetings. Over the course of the few days negotiating over five thousand Choctaw men, women and children camped at Dancing Rabbit.¹⁴² About sixty Choctaw men made up the council. Before the council began they had to be seated. Seven of the oldest Choctaw women formed the innermost circle. Outside of them sat the male council members. The interpreter promised these women that he would interpret everything said truthfully. After being seated, the U.S. commissioners read off their treaty proposal. When they were finished, a councilman named Killihota

¹⁴⁰ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 28-29.

¹⁴¹ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 17-29.

¹⁴² File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek 1831, pp. 17 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

stood up to speak. He spoke about how much he wanted to move West and what a great opportunity it would be for their tribe.¹⁴³ During Choctaw council meetings, when one person spoke the rest of the room remained completely silent and no one attempted to interrupt.¹⁴⁴ When Killihota had finished speaking, then talk amongst the council commenced. Those most outwardly angry in the room were the seven elderly women seated in the circle. They shouted and voiced their displeasure for all to hear. One of them stood up and made an advance at Killihota with a butcher's knife. She said that if she were to cut Killihota open, it would reveal he had two hearts. By this she meant that he was loyal to the white people, in addition to his Choctaw loyalty. After her speech, two men followed denouncing him as well. Then, one man gave a speech telling them to vote against removal. After this it was time for the vote. The vote was taken by passing a stick around the circle of councilmen. If the councilmen tapped the stick on the ground they voted "yes," by passing the stick without tapping it they indicated a vote of "no." Killihota was the only one of all the councilmen to vote in agreement to remove. After the vote, the pipe was passed around and everyone took a smoke, the white men present, too.¹⁴⁵ Choctaw tribal councils were public, and in this one it is clear to see that women's opinions were welcomed and respected. Though they did not have a formal vote, their influence was clear and direct, like in this instance with the old woman shaming

¹⁴³ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek 1831, pp. 49-63 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁴⁴ File: 14 Halbert, H. S. Indian Character, pp. 1 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁴⁵ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek 1831, pp. 63-75 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

Killihota. She was not going to change his vote, but her refusal to budge from her position even one inch told the male Choctaw councilmen that they should not either. She was successful in her endeavor, and no one else voted with Killihota. Unfortunately for the Choctaws, a removal treaty agreement was made anyway, despite their valiant efforts to block it. Those Choctaws who remained in Mississippi under the provision of Article 14 of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, made up the people who would have to work and fight daily for the rights of the Mississippi Choctaws in the following years.

Because of the Choctaw belief system, politics and religion often intersected, particularly in matters of tribal law. In 1829, the Choctaws passed a new law that people could no longer be charged and executed on the crime of witchcraft. This was important because it reflected changes in religious belief, worldviews and crimes.¹⁴⁶ Charges of witchcraft were most often levied against women, but could also be against people who seemed abnormal in some way. Among the Cherokees it was common to accuse those who were very old of witchcraft because they had exceeded the normal lifespan.¹⁴⁷ Women were often the targets of witch hunts because they were already considered to be more mysterious and connected to the occult than men. Women's menses was an aberration of the normal state of blood in the Choctaw belief system, which meant that there was something different about them. Oftentimes, "different" was enough to make people believe someone was a witch. Even after the execution for witchcraft was outlawed, Choctaws still continued believing in witches' existence. In 1901, three

¹⁴⁶ File: 92 Halbert, H. S. Progress of the Choctaws in Civilization in 1829- '30, pp. 3-4 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2167, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁴⁷ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 182.

Choctaw men in Texas were sentenced to death for killing three people believed to be witches, two of whom were women.¹⁴⁸ By this time there was a growing population of Christian Choctaws. In 1830, it was estimated there were around 2,000 Christian believers and this number only grew by the early twentieth century.¹⁴⁹ The advent of Christianity in the Choctaw community was important because it brought a different worldview and led the Choctaws to modify some of their tribal laws.

Christianity came to the Choctaws, but spreading this new faith was a slow and arduous process. Since most Christian Choctaws moved west during the forced removals of the 1830s, missionaries had to start fresh with the Choctaws who remained in Mississippi in the late nineteenth century. First, money had to be raised to pay for the establishment of a church and a preacher's salary. White churches where these efforts began took up collections to fund the establishment of churches. Often, even this was not enough, because there was no enticement to get Choctaws in the church doors. To make the new faith look more attractive, many different Christian denominations set up schools for Choctaw children in Mississippi, providing them with a free education. This service was particularly valuable in Jim Crow Mississippi since Choctaw children were prohibited from attending white schools and reluctant to attend institutions for African Americans. It was the kind of incentive that brought Choctaws into church on Sundays.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ "For Killing 'Witches' Gallows Gets Hotema: Trial That Recalls New England History Has Been Concluded at Paris, Tex.," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), November 27, 1901, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution (1868-1945), 1.

¹⁴⁹ File: 90 Halbert, H. S. Exploring Delegation, 1830- The Three Government Emigrations, 1831, 1832, 1833, pp. 52 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2167, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁵⁰ File: 11 Halbert, H. S. Baptist Choctaw Mission, pp. 1-43 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS; File: 12 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Catholic Mission, pp. 1-11 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama:

Also, some churches provided farmland to their flock, which was an important asset, especially for Choctaws who had lost their promised allotments in the years following removal.¹⁵¹

After the first Removal, the Christian church began to look for ways into the Choctaw community. It had made short-sighted efforts before, but in the mid-nineteenth century the Baptist church decided to make a more permanent establishment in the community. It took a while to get the money and resources, but the Baptists had a strong foothold by 1886. By then, there was a Bible printed in the Choctaw language and a hymnal. This was the work of a missionary named Cyrus Byington, who was hoping to gain more Choctaw converts by giving them the Scriptures in their native language.¹⁵² In 1886, there were three Choctaw Baptist churches. In 1888, two Choctaws were ordained as deacons and another Choctaw became a licensed preacher. Choctaw women were praised in the Baptist church for their model behavior, exhibiting humility and demureness.¹⁵³ Like Choctaw men, Choctaw women found comfort in some of the familiar aspects of Christianity.

This new religion easily fit into some of the Choctaws' pre-existing beliefs. It promoted ideas of demureness, and Choctaw women's dress had always been modest. For some women, even if the cosmology was not particularly enticing, being a member of a church came with a lot of benefits. It meant that their child could get an education for

Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, *Mississippi Department of Archives and History*, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁵¹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 29.

¹⁵² Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 81.

¹⁵³ File: 11 Halbert, H. S. Baptist Choctaw Mission, pp. 1-40 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. *Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-4294, *Mississippi Department of Archives and History*, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

free, it provided an instant network and community, churches had ties to white communities and broader American politics and, much like Choctaw government, women could use their influence to work indirectly within the church. Conversion to Christianity came to Choctaws in different ways and for different reasons. Many Choctaws viewed conversion to Christianity as a way to reinforce, rather than undermine their Choctaw identity. Churches trained and educated Choctaws so that they could preach, and services were held in Choctaws' native tongue. Within the churches, they practiced the gender binary that was familiar to Choctaws, separating men from women during worship services.¹⁵⁴ For other Choctaws, it was a matter of belief. They truly accepted this new religion and believed in its teachings. The Cherokees underwent a similar process of Christianization, and for many of their women who were educated in the mission schools, conversion was the natural next step.¹⁵⁵ Whatever their reasons, this conversion to Christianity had a serious effect on the status of women. Christianity promoted a paternalistic family structure, and as it worked its way into Choctaw society, it gradually undermined the matrilineal kinship system and replaced it with the patriarchy.

The Baptist church quickly became the new source of social activity. It provided recreation and a meeting place, and not long after became the new source of leadership for the Choctaws. This avenue for leadership was particularly important since removal sent the tribal government west, leaving the Choctaws in Mississippi without a formal political structure. The Choctaws liked the Baptist Church because it was run democratically and by Choctaw leaders. They did not feel the outside pressures creeping

¹⁵⁴ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 29.

¹⁵⁵ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 9.

in on them here. It was without pretense. Though the Baptist church brought with it an entirely new religion of it, certain aspects of it appealed to Choctaws because of their similarities to Choctaw religious practice, like men and women being segregated during church services. Even after church, the Choctaws would stay on the grounds to eat, and here men and women would eat separately as well. The social activity provided by the church was another tantalizing factor. After eating, Choctaws would spend time together playing ball games.¹⁵⁶ One of the first female Choctaw members of the Tribal Council reflected on her youth in an interview, and one of her first memories was of attending a Christmas service at Macedonie Baptist Church. She was born in 1917, so this would have been sometime in the 1920's, but she recalled that the Christmas party was held at her church, not at home. To get to this Christmas party they had to ride ten miles by wagon.¹⁵⁷ The Christian church was a prominent fixture in her life, acting as both church and school for some time.¹⁵⁸

Baptists did not have the monopoly on Christianity among Choctaws for long. Not far behind the Baptists came the Catholic denomination. Catholicism attracted a large number of Choctaws in a short period of time. One of the priests made a note that in his brief tenure, during the late 1880s, he baptized 938 Choctaws. After the second Removal at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic missionaries followed the

¹⁵⁶ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 83-84.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Mary Lou Farmer, December 3, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1- 5.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Mary Lou Farmer, December 3, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 19.

Choctaws west.¹⁵⁹ Like many institutions after this second Removal, the remaining Catholics had to rebuild their numbers. By 1900, three major Christian churches were established, with significant congregation numbers including Baptist, Catholic and Methodist. Church sermons in these other denominations were also preached by Choctaw pastors in the Choctaw language, and they were segregated within the church based on sex.¹⁶⁰ Christianity took a firm hold in the Choctaw community and life for both adults and children began to focus on two areas: church and school. Because of this focus, the churches wielded great power and provided Choctaw men and women with opportunities to take on new leadership roles.¹⁶¹

In addition to exerting informal power in the churches, Choctaw women in the twentieth century also used community gatherings and projects as avenues to discuss tribal matters and influence tribal decisions. Oftentimes gatherings would include an activity, such as a sewing circle. One famous sewing group was organized by the wives of important male members of the community Dixie Johnson and Callie Chitto. Another well-known women's sewing circle was organized by wives of prominent political figures from Red Water School. Some of these same women also took part in another circle, this one a cooking class. These women, apart from their husbands' notoriety, were figureheads in their communities as well. They were resourceful and influential, working

¹⁵⁹ File: 12 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Catholic Mission, pp. 3-11 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁶⁰ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 29.

¹⁶¹ Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 85.

towards problem-solving important tribal issues from an informal organization of power.¹⁶²

The mid-twentieth century finally brought Choctaw women the chance to officially participate in Choctaw governmental affairs. In 1945, the Mississippi Choctaws took advantage of the Indian Reorganization Act, and organized a new semi-autonomous government and write their own constitution.¹⁶³ The 1945 Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Constitution provided parameters for Tribal Council elected officials, including age, education level and community endorsement. The constitution provided women the opportunity to serve on the Tribal Council as long as they met the other requirements. For the first time, Choctaw women were given the opportunity to hold a formal seat of power and cast a vote concerning tribal policy.¹⁶⁴ American women had already gotten the right to vote, and this was influential in Choctaw women getting the vote. Women took advantage of this new opportunity, and the first woman, Cleddie Bell, sat on the Tribal Council in 1950.¹⁶⁵

Women, who at one time would have never even been considered for a spot on the tribal council, made their way into these old seats of power. The main difference for Choctaw women was the vote they were able to cast in holding a seat on the council. Women had always been able to speak to the Tribal Council and make their opinions known. Having a voice on the council was not the achievement, but gaining a formal vote as a Tribal Council member was an important one. The first female Tribal Council

¹⁶² Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 67-68.

¹⁶³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 130-131.

¹⁶⁴ Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, *Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Constitution and Bylaws*, 1945, <http://www.choctaw.org/pdf/MBCI%20Constituion%20&%20Bylaws.6.23.pdf>, vi.

¹⁶⁵ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 135.

member, Cleddie Bell, was followed by Nettie Jimmie in 1961. Both women filled the vacant positions left by their husbands. Choctaw women used their name recognition and kinship ties to prominent male figures to secure political positions for themselves. Other women were soon to follow. Mary Lou Farmer became a Tribal Council member, in 1955, and Ina Thomson in 1963. Bell was known for her outspoken leadership; she refused to compromise her Choctaw values and identity. If she felt her colleagues were in any way threatening that, she was the first to speak up, questioning their intentions and reminding the council of their duty to uphold Choctaw autonomy. Bell made it her personal crusade to push for a high school, and her service only ended with her death in 1963.¹⁶⁶ Poetically enough, the high school she worked so hard for opened in that same year.¹⁶⁷

With their new positions of leadership, Choctaw women continued working tirelessly on many different projects for the Choctaws. They formed the Women's Council Club which served meals at council meetings to raise money for lobbying groups and other council activities. Choctaw women using cooking as a fundraiser was as much symbolic of their cultural role within the gendered division of labor as it was practical. Women could also refuse to cook, and this was a protest that was taken very seriously. Choctaw women took part in boots-on-the-ground efforts in addition to their work organizing events. They served on election committees and lobbyist groups fighting for communal improvements. Because of the extensive poverty that characterized the

¹⁶⁶ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 135-136.

¹⁶⁷ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 124.

Mississippi Choctaws, much of the tribal governments work focused on economic developments and making improvements to public works.¹⁶⁸

Part of making real and notable change in the Choctaw communities was organizing grassroots efforts in each community. It got more people involved in the project and shared the burden of the project. The tribal council began by creating the Tribal Community Club Committee which encouraged and supported these efforts. In addition to this, three communities organized Women's Clubs. These organizations met once a week to provide leadership training to more women. By 1959 four communities established Women's Clubs and there were 68 women total involved in them.¹⁶⁹

The Women's Clubs and other groups organized by the Tribal Council became important forums where Choctaws, male and female, felt they could address their issues and find support from their fellow Choctaws. Reports from 1955 to 1965 reveal that these clubs had become fixtures in the community. This was a place where Choctaws exercised their will and learned to become leaders.¹⁷⁰ With the establishment of their own forums, organizations, and movement onto the Choctaw Tribal Council, Choctaw women departed from their history as indirect sources of power and took on positions of direct power. Holding a position on the Tribal Council gave a woman a voice and a vote in tribal affairs, a position she never would have held in the nineteenth century.

The efforts made by these groups in strengthening their communities was important in revitalizing the Mississippi Choctaws. In the latter half of the twentieth

¹⁶⁸ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 136-137.

¹⁶⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 154-155.

¹⁷⁰ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 154-156.

century, with the decline of agricultural jobs, many Choctaws migrated out of Mississippi. In particular, the community was losing the young blood that had just graduated high school or college. These were important members of their society, and the Choctaws needed to retain this group.¹⁷¹ Oftentimes, it was not that they wanted to leave their ancestral homeland, but they needed to find work. When economic and community development efforts led by Chief Phillip Martin and the tribal council finally took hold, the economic climate turned around. Martin developed the RCA project which trained Choctaws for factory work and successfully helped to employ graduates of the program. He also had the Superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other non-Indian members replaced with competent Choctaws. They gave the Choctaws the room for them to take flight and develop industry. Finally, there were jobs at home available to both men and women.¹⁷² The new job market brought back many of those who left to find work. Louise Willis, a young, Choctaw woman, explained that this was why she returned home, in 1973. She also drew attention to the work churches did to help Choctaw women. Although she did not regularly attend church services at the Methodist Church, her children were in daycare there. Being a widow, this service was crucial to her because it freed her up to work.¹⁷³ It was through the efforts of Choctaw women that services like this were established. Women in the church could fill in the gaps that women in politics could not reach. Little endeavors like setting up a daycare made a big difference for many Choctaw women.

¹⁷¹ Peterson, "Assimilation, Separation, and Out-Migration," 1288-1289.

¹⁷² McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 122-130.

¹⁷³ Interview with Louise Willis, December 4, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 8-9.

Choctaw political work included more than just local, tribal matters. As a Native American group, they were affected by discrimination, segregation and oppression by whites like many other Native American groups. In the 1960's the Choctaws joined the Pan-Indian activist work going on. Chief Phillip Martin attended the American Indian Conference in Chicago, Illinois where Indian leaders from all across the country gathered. Martin helped draft the Declaration of Indian Purpose. This document detailed the goals of all Indian groups, and they had one purpose: self-determination. Chief Martin was also part of the delegation that took this document to Washington D.C. to present their declaration to President Kennedy, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Chief Phillip Martin attended more Pan-Indian activist meetings, even bringing the Choctaw Princess Sally Ann Bell with him to one of the conferences in North Dakota. While serving primarily as a symbolic figure, the Choctaw Princess provided a presence for women in national politics.¹⁷⁴ The Choctaw Princess was important politically because of her status as a symbolic figurehead. She functioned much like an ambassador of the people of her tribe. The Choctaw Princess Pageant began in 1955, and was a new event for the Choctaw Indian Fair. It was similar to the Miss America pageant, but it focused more on Choctaw heritage. The Choctaw Princess traveled often with chiefs as a representative of her tribe.¹⁷⁵ Her presence at political gatherings ensured an open-door policy, because she was able to see and report on what was really going on. Symbolically, she was a reminder that the decisions that the politicians made would

¹⁷⁴ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 198-201.

¹⁷⁵ "Choctaw Indian Princess Pageant," *Choctaw Indian Fair*, <http://www.choctawindianfair.com/pageant/index.html>.

affect real people at home, like her and that women, as well as men, should have a voice in decisions made about the future of the tribe.

To continue growing and expanding the female presence in leadership positions, there was a push from the older generation of Choctaw women to send girls through formal education. With the high school established, in 1963, girls were at the very least expected to finish high school. After that, they were encouraged by their family members and Choctaw political organizations to pursue a college degree. Formal education was valued since its institution among the Choctaws in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷⁶ The establishment of a high school helped immensely in the effort to send girls to college. In the years 1956, 1957 and 1958, only seven women had any kind of formal education beyond high school.¹⁷⁷

By the 1970s many women attended some form of education beyond high school. Girls in high school had ambitions to graduate and pursue further education. In an interview with Karen Lilly, in 1979, the Choctaw Princess had plans to study medicine and enter the psychiatry field.¹⁷⁸ This goal was exactly the type of outcome the older women were hoping for in pushing girls to pursue education. Many women like Delaura Henry would attend college and then return to the reservation to work.¹⁷⁹ This was another scenario which the tribe pushed for. Girls could go out and get an education,

¹⁷⁶ File: 12 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Catholic Mission, pp. 5 *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.*

¹⁷⁷ Tolbert, "A Sociological Study of the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi," 156.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Karen Lilly, October 1, 1979, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 4.*

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Delaura Henry, January 31, 1974, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1-7.*

then bring that home to better their community. Other women like Linda Willis knew they wanted to attend college, but were unsure if they would return to Mississippi afterwards.¹⁸⁰ Although this course of action would not have benefitted the tribe, her goal of pursuing a college education showed that the tribe's push for more and more education had borne fruit.

Over the course of two centuries, there has been amazing growth in the political power and leadership roles of Choctaw women. Women have long exerted their influence. They were respected and listened to, but at the end of the day their opinion did not count as a vote in the Choctaw council. Council seats were reserved solely for men. Choctaw women, then, worked around the formal seats of power. They collaborated to support both the tribe and female advancement in politics. Women worked in clubs and served as church members of powerful religious institutions which gave them prestige independent from that of their husband's. Finally, women made their way onto the Choctaw Tribal Council. There, they were able to help establish economic and community development projects and promote higher education. On the council, their opinion finally mattered in the form of a vote. They used that political power to make sure that future generations of Choctaw women would continue to have strong leadership roles in the tribe.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Linda Willis, August 29, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 5.

Recreational Activities

Recreational activities tell a lot about who the Choctaws were as a society, their values, their interests and their pleasures. Activities outside of work show what the Choctaws enjoyed doing in their free time, and what they enjoyed doing together as a group. Like the gendered division of labor, Choctaw social activities were often gender-specific. Customarily, women wove baskets, did beadwork and made pottery, while men made blowguns and taught their nephews how to use them. In early Choctaw history, these tasks were more work than pleasure, but, in later years, when basket-making was no longer needed for practical reasons, it became an enjoyable pastime that defined Choctaw identity. Choctaws also shared time together, dancing and playing stickball. Choctaws' social customs moved and evolved with the times, and they added many American pastimes to their own, like watching television and listening to the radio. As a society, though, they have worked to retain those original pastimes, which have for so long defined them as a distinct group. Their games and activities have been refined over the years, but at their core, Choctaws social life is still as unique as ever.

Basket weaving has long been a recreational and purposeful activity for Choctaw women, and with the advent of white traders became an economic endeavor as well. Historically, in the winter, women would gather the cane for their baskets because it became too brittle in the summer. They skinned off the outside of the cane with petrified hickory wood fashioned into a knife, but they later replaced this tool with a knife made by the silversmith. After they prepared the cane, Choctaw women wove many different

types of baskets. Some baskets were of a single weave while others were double, and baskets were made with a specific usage in mind. Women made a scrap basket, knife basket, load basket, “to walk holding basket,” medicine basket and a sifter.¹⁸¹ Basket-making required a lot of work and artistry, and it required dedication as well as skill.

Before weaving even began, there was work to do to prepare the cane. After peeling, it had to be dried and dyed in various colors. These colors interwoven created beautiful patterns. The Choctaws prepared dyes from natural colors in the environment, which limited the colors they could use. They made yellow dye from puccoon roots, brown dye from walnuts and purple dye from maple. They boiled these elements to release their color and then bottled the mixture.¹⁸² The most favored colors of Choctaw women were green, red, yellow and black, which they usually wove into some type of diamond design.¹⁸³ Basketry was practiced by Choctaw women, young and old, and was taught to girls at a young age as part of their domestic education.¹⁸⁴

Early on in their history with European traders, Choctaw women began bartering their baskets for other goods. Europeans brought with them new kinds of beads, paints, clothes and other small items of interest to Choctaws.¹⁸⁵ Europeans also brought with them useful household items like brass kettles and metal pots. Similar to their Cherokee neighbors, it took a while for these items to displace customary Choctaw wares, but they were introduced early on in their relationship with Europeans. Choctaw women

¹⁸¹ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 40-41.

¹⁸² Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 41.

¹⁸³ File: 28 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Baskets and Pots, pp. 2, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁸⁴ File: 30 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Domestic Government, pp. 47-48, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁸⁵ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 56.

continued weaving their baskets, but they now had a new source of wares which did not require their own handiwork.¹⁸⁶

Throughout the twentieth century, Choctaw women continued selling their woven baskets, turning this recreational activity into a small but important source of revenue. Baskets also came to be a defining feature of Choctaw women because they were marketed as Choctaw-made. This worked both for and against them. This market helped to distinguish them as a separate group from their white American neighbors, but it also meant they could not sell their baskets for much. Choctaw baskets had novelty value for whites, but were not in high demand. Some whites helped the Choctaws get their baskets out into the marketplace, acting as a sort of intermediary between them and the rest of the public. Mrs. James Arnold was one such woman who sold Choctaw baskets in Washington D.C., and in an article about her business she reported that she had somewhere between six and seven hundred baskets available for purchase. Each basket had the maker's name written on a tag, and Mrs. Arnold would mail the check to them after a sale had been made.¹⁸⁷ A little closer to home, a white friend of the Choctaws convinced the Municipal Art Gallery in Jackson to also sell Choctaw baskets. Here, too, the profits were small, but baskets were reinforced as part of the Choctaw identity.¹⁸⁸ Even by the middle of the twentieth century, a Choctaw basket packed with corn meal only cost between fifty cents and a dollar.¹⁸⁹

Choctaws were eventually able to create their own market place in the form of the Choctaw Indian Fair. The fair was first put on, in 1949, not long after the tribe

¹⁸⁶ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 66.

¹⁸⁷ "Choctaw Baskets Distributed from Cellar," 12.

¹⁸⁸ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 62.

¹⁸⁹ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 40.

reorganized and adopted a new constitution in 1945. This fair attracted many tourists and generated a new source of income for the tribe.¹⁹⁰ Woven baskets were among the many Choctaw crafts sold at the fair, and Choctaw women even held lessons to show how they were made.¹⁹¹ In many ways, these basketry lessons were as important for Choctaw women as they were for tourists because weaving had begun dying out as a popular activity among them. In 1974, DeLaura Henry, a Choctaw woman, gave an interview where she said there were only six women left in the community who knew how to make the baskets. Even so, these basket-makers modernized in some areas, using commercial dyes instead of making their own. A few of them had also abandoned the use of swamp cane because of the difficulty in getting it.¹⁹² Choctaw basket weaving persisted as a recreational activity for women, but it changed along with the times. There were new technologies and resources available to them that made some of the former, laborious tasks, like making dye, unnecessary.

Choctaw women recognized this change in their customary activities but understood that it was just a response to the change and growth of the tribe. In that same interview, with DeLaura Henry, she went on to say that their cultural preservation program held workshops to teach the young girls in the tribe how to weave, but they simply did not have the time to devote to learn how to do it. Choctaw girls were now busy with formal education at school, whereas in the past, basket weaving had been part of the education a mother passed down to her daughter. Although Henry and other

¹⁹⁰ McKee and Murray, "Economic Progress and Development," 128.

¹⁹¹ Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, "An Historical Event: The Annual Choctaw Indian Fair," (Philadelphia, July 12, 1986), 3.

¹⁹² Linda Willis and Patricia Martin, "A Believer in her Heritage- an interview with DeLaura Henry," *Nanah Waiya*, Spring, 1974, 38.

cultural preservationists knew the challenges they faced, they still believed it was worthwhile to do what they could to keep the cultural practices alive. Henry explained:

Our main hope for the arts and crafts is to try to preserve our customs and culture that our ancestors left us. Like many other tribes in the United States, we're gradually losing our Choctaw customs. We are trying to prevent this from extending further and further to where we won't have anything to show that we are Choctaws.¹⁹³

Basketry lost its place as one of the most popular Choctaw women's recreational activities, but it has retained its status as one of the benchmarks of conventional Choctaw handiwork. In fact, it is truly a hallmark of the Mississippi Choctaws, because like them it has changed and adapted but most importantly, remained.

Choctaw women were skillful craftswomen, and their work spanned several different kinds of artistic endeavors. In addition to their basket-making, Choctaw women made exquisite beadwork to adorn themselves and the clothes they made for Choctaw men. Customary Choctaw garb was accessorized with beads and silver jewelry, worn by both men and women.¹⁹⁴ Before trade opened up with Europeans, Choctaw women made wooden beads or sometimes used chinquapin nuts. They dyed these using the same dye for their cane baskets, then made them into various kinds of ornamentation. Women made bead necklaces, belts and added beads to moccasins. Conventional wooden beads were not as coveted as the glass beads Europeans brought over, because of their scarcity and they lasted longer. With these new beads, Choctaw women began to make even

¹⁹³ Willis, "an interview with DeLaura Henry," 41.

¹⁹⁴ File: 10 Halbert, H. S. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, 1831, pp. 20-22, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

more use of decorative beadwork, stringing together multicolored necklaces that were up to four yards long.¹⁹⁵

These beads were important possessions to Choctaws because they demonstrated that one had wealth and status. Choctaw women and the women in their families were given gifts as part of marriage ceremonies. Beads were a popular and coveted wedding gift among the many other trinkets.¹⁹⁶ Men wore beads, but were not as heavily adorned with them and did not place as much value on them. In the later part of the nineteenth century, when a Choctaw woman died, certain possessions would be buried with her body, among these would be her beads. During the time of mourning, Choctaw women in her family would refrain from wearing their beads or any other kind of ornamentation. This was a sign of respect to the recently deceased, and, depending on the woman, even women who were part of her extended family would adopt the same practice.¹⁹⁷ So while bead-making originated as a Choctaw woman's recreational activity, owning European beads became in vogue and displaced the importance once associated with wooden beads.

As the world outside the Choctaws changed and shifted in the twentieth century, so too did white Americans' style of dress. Choctaw men were the first to begin dressing more like their American neighbors, perhaps because they interacted more with white men through trade and sharecropping relationships, while Choctaw women retained their style of long cotton dresses, which they had adopted in the early nineteenth century.

Choctaw women first made the shift from their customary style of dress with the arrival

¹⁹⁵ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 43.

¹⁹⁶ File: 15 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Marriage Customs, pp. 1-2, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁹⁷ File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Customs, pp. 26-35, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

of white traders. Women exchanged their animal skins for European dresses and coats.¹⁹⁸ Their twentieth-century dresses differed in design from their earlier garb, but they were still floor length. However, as evidenced from accounts and pictures of Choctaw women in the early part of the twentieth century, they began un-adorning themselves with beadwork. The long, beaded necklaces were discarded, being considered part of their old style of dress.¹⁹⁹ This might also have reflected their impoverished condition in early twentieth-century Mississippi. Glass beads were a luxury that many women could no longer afford.

Being a Choctaw was difficult in this time period. White Americans enjoyed facets of Native American culture, but also wanted to see them move in a “progressive” direction. Caught between these conflicting interests, Choctaws had to effectively become like the Roman god Janus, showing one face looking to their future in America and another looking back to remember their culture and past. Mississippi Choctaws were already living in a sort of limbo in the segregation-era South. They were not put in the same class system with African-Americans, but they were shunned from much of white society. It was difficult for Choctaw women to get jobs, and so many had to abandon their Choctaw dress in order to work. Choctaws were desperately poor, and they had to adapt to survive.²⁰⁰

Beadwork became a cultural relic of Choctaw women, and was only hauled out when they dressed up in customary garb or sold it at the Choctaw Indian Fair.²⁰¹ Like

¹⁹⁸ File: 50 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Dress, pp. 9, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

¹⁹⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 74.

²⁰⁰ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 83.

²⁰¹ Austin Tubby, Frederick Wilson and Keith Bacon, “...our baby won...” *Nanah Waiya*, Fall, 1973, 5.

many other Choctaw crafts, beadwork in the latter part of the twentieth century was a little-used art. It was no longer a part of their everyday dress, and the activity fell into disuse. It was also one of the customary Choctaw recreational activities which was demonstrated at the Choctaw Indian Fair, because of its history but also because of its increasing rarity.²⁰² Like basket-making, it was mostly the older generations of Choctaws who kept the custom alive, and few younger Choctaws had an interest in or time for beadwork.²⁰³

The one women's recreational activity that fell into disuse by the twentieth century was Choctaw pottery. Before European cooking wares arrived, Choctaw women had to make their own bowls and pots. Pots were made of clay and were decorated with straight, curved or circular patterned designs. The first part of this process was to mold the clay into the size and shape they wanted, then they drew in the designs on the outside. To set the pots, women would have to build a fire. They covered the wet clay in bark and then placed the piece onto the fire. After its shape had been secured, the bark was taken off and the pot was ready for use.²⁰⁴ Choctaw women also used this process to make clay mortars, a cooking tool important for making hominy. White observers of Choctaw homes always noted the presence of an earthen pot and mortar in the Choctaw cooking area.²⁰⁵ Choctaw women were inventive and used their pottery skills to make other items they needed. An early French observer noted that a few Choctaw women also made

²⁰² Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, "An Historical Event: The Annual Choctaw Indian Fair," (Philadelphia, July 12, 1986), 3.

²⁰³ Ronnie Alex, "1973 Cultural Program," *Nanih Waiya*, Fall, 1973, 44.

²⁰⁴ File: 28 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Baskets and Pots, pp. 55-56, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²⁰⁵ File: 26 Halbert, H. S. The Choctaws as Farmers, pp. 27, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837-1916. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History*, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

earthen pans.²⁰⁶ These household wares were absolutely essential, and there was no other way to obtain these items, before the Europeans came, but by making them.

When the Choctaws opened up trade with Europeans, they brought in the items which would displace Choctaw pottery. Choctaws could now purchase brass kettles, pots and tin cups.²⁰⁷ These items were much more durable than clay pottery, and they slowly became staples in Choctaw households. Even after acquiring European pots, Choctaws continued making their pottery, but this did not last long.²⁰⁸ Choctaw pottery-making went out of fashion by the early twentieth century. Before the establishment of the Choctaw Indian Fair, Choctaw women sold their goods and items at street fairs or any other venue available. They sold items like canned goods, sewing projects, their baskets and beadwork, but there was no mention of Choctaw pottery.²⁰⁹ In the *Nanah Waiya* magazine series, which was produced by a staff of students at Choctaw High School, they dedicated an issue to cultural preservation in 1974, but Choctaw pottery was not even mentioned.²¹⁰ Pottery no longer served as a distinct ethnic marker for Choctaw women.

In addition to producing unique crafts, Choctaw women also engaged in cultural practices like dancing. Choctaw dances are a distinct and beautiful expression of their culture, revealing their connection to nature, their cultural practices, and social relationships. Like other recreational activities, it has declined in popularity, but Choctaws have managed to keep the conventional dances and music alive. Each Choctaw dance had a specific name, and the name reflected the animal or natural element

²⁰⁶ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 38.

²⁰⁷ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 39.

²⁰⁸ Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path*, 52.

²⁰⁹ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 105.

²¹⁰ *Nanah Waiya*, Spring, 1974.

which the dance mimicked. Some of the names of these dances were, “the tick dance,” “the smoke dance,” and “the bear dance.”²¹¹ The movement of the dancers would follow a pattern that was thought to express the spirit of the animal or entity.

In addition to the different types of dances, there was a protocol that was followed for dancing in early Choctaw history. Men always performed the first dance, and they danced without a partner. After their dance, the women chose a partner and danced all of the rest of the dances with him.²¹² These regulations extended beyond regular social gatherings to dictate who could perform certain dances. For instance, “the scalp dance” was reserved for women only. When Choctaw warriors returned home four days were spent in celebration. Warriors brought back with them the scalps of those they killed in battle, and this was the inspiration for the scalp dance. After the women had done their dance, scalps were hung atop the winter house until they decayed.²¹³ It was from these natural occurrences and life experiences that Choctaws drew their celebratory ideas.

Choctaws danced on many different occasions, usually ones where a big group was gathered. After the Choctaw wedding ceremony, there would be a big dance and feast as part of the celebration.²¹⁴ Before a stickball game Choctaw men and women engaged in a less formal dance. Men played the first game, and the respective teams

²¹¹ File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Custom, pp. 43-44, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²¹² File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Custom, pp. 45, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²¹³ File: 18 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw War Customs, pp. 9-10, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²¹⁴ File: 34 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Marriage Customs: Maternity, Punishment of Adultery, pp. 27, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

went to their poles where they danced, sung and chanted. Women did the same on the sidelines.²¹⁵ Choctaws also danced for somber reasons, twice a year, paying their respects to the dead. Each year, in spring and fall, the Choctaw people gathered and divided into their respective iksas. One iksa would go to the bone house, take out the boxes and weep. The other iksa danced, and the following day the iksas switched places. The Choctaws then replaced the boxes into the bone house until the next seasonal funerary dance.²¹⁶ This was an early custom of the Choctaws, and as Christianity took hold this practice of burial fell into disuse. Dance was reflective of everyday life, and so it makes sense that as their world changed, these old dances no longer fit.

Choctaws performed their dances to music, and they played this music on handmade instruments. Choctaws made drums from hollowed out tree trunks with a prepared deer skin stretched over the top, and they also cut cane to make small flutes. The drummer would sing or hum as he played and led the Choctaws in each dance. An early observer of Choctaw dances wrote, “Yet the ancient Choctaw... did not depend so much upon the jarring tones of the diminutive drum as he did upon his own voice.”²¹⁷ Drummers were very important for keeping the rhythm and music of the dance going. The Choctaws also made rattles to use as instruments, but the rattle was reserved for “the snake dance.” It was used exclusively to mimic the sound of a rattlesnake’s tail.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ File: 52 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Games, pp. 8-9, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²¹⁶ File: 53 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Burial and Funeral Custom, pp. 11, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²¹⁷ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 223.

²¹⁸ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 224.

One of the most prominent and famous dances of the Choctaws was the Green Corn Dance. This dance was part of the Green Corn Ceremony which was held usually in August. Corn was a staple in the diet of the Choctaws, and this ceremony was to celebrate the year's crop as well as handle other government and administrative duties. Choctaw women were the farmers in their society, so this celebration also held a special significance for them. Because of all the activities and the symbolic importance, the ceremony became a major annual event. During these celebrations, the Choctaws danced for three days. At the last dance, the women were ceremonially relieved of the burden of carrying the corn hampers on their back. After this final dance, there was a feast, and then the celebrations came to a close.²¹⁹ This dance and celebration showed the importance of women and their work, especially in their early history.

Choctaw dancing fell into a serious decline, in the early twentieth century as the Choctaw world was disrupted by economic changes and the second removal, but since that time Choctaws began making a concerted effort to preserve customary dances. In the 1973 fall edition of the *Nanih Waiya* magazine, an interviewee, Amy Jackson, recalled, "We almost lost all of the dances one time. It was the old people who started dancing and now I don't miss singing or dancing."²²⁰ She went on to describe how dances were then regularly organized in order to teach the younger generations. Jackson said she did not consider it all just work to preserve culture, but she had fun dancing and singing.²²¹

²¹⁹ Swanton, *Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 225-226.

²²⁰ "Choctaw Social Dancing" *Nanih Waiya*, Fall, 1973, 30.

²²¹ "Choctaw Social Dancing," 30-31.

Customary Choctaw dancing was also done each year at the Choctaw Indian Fair in July. Sometimes it was done as a performance and other times as a competition. This, in addition to the social dances scheduled by older Choctaws, has helped to prevent the loss of these dances.²²² One of the challenges Choctaws faced in preserving their dances was cultivating interest among the younger generations. The 1973 Choctaw Indian Princess, Linda Willis, said in an interview that her generation did not try very hard when learning and performing the culturally-practiced dances, and she was one of the only ones who liked them.²²³ When the dances were performed originally, they had much more meaning and connection to the everyday lives of the Choctaw. With the changes brought by American society and adopted by the Choctaws, the dances no longer had the same meaning for Choctaws.

Stickball has been the favored recreational sport for Choctaw men and women for centuries, and little about the game has changed over the years. Customarily, men and women assembled for a stickball game dressed in their finest garb. The first part of the day was passed singing and dancing. When it came time for the game, there was a lot to do to get ready. The men first had to set up their posts at each end of the playing field. Then, the men stripped off their nice clothes and put on their game attire. The men painted their bodies with a variety of color, tied a panther tail around their waist and covered their arms and heads in feathers. Teams were usually around forty players each, but it did not matter as long as teams had an equal number of players. The game ball was

²²² Willard Bacon, "Preview of the '74 Choctaw Indian Fair," Spring, 1974, 53.

²²³ Tubby, Wilson and Bacon, "...our baby won..." *Nanih Waiya*, Fall, 1973, 7.

made of buckskin, and after everything was set up the game began. It was a violent game, but Choctaws understood that it was all recreational, not about quarrelling.²²⁴

Early in their history, the Choctaws used to play stickball against other Native American groups, like the Creeks. These games were recreational as well, but one bad game did lead to a battle between the Creeks and the Choctaws.²²⁵ These early stickball games were observed with interest by many white settlers, because they did not have a game to equal the violence of this one. An 1871 article written by the *New York Times* noted, “The game constituted one of the most interesting and strange spectacles that can be imagined.”²²⁶ This article, and another one, in 1894, written by an American magazine portrayed stickball as a masculine sport and left out any mention of the women playing their own game.²²⁷ However, after the men played their stickball game, the women ended the day with their own game.

During the men’s stickball game, women placed bets on the game, gambling a variety of goods like blankets, clothes, horses, and more.²²⁸ Women only made bets against other women, and men made their bets against other men.²²⁹ Once the men were

²²⁴ File: 42 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 11-14, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²²⁵ File: 19 Halbert, H. S. Games of the Southern Indians; Their Tendency to Bet and Gamble, pp. 51-57, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²²⁶ “Ball Playing Among Indians,” *New York Times* (1857-1922), Sep 9, 1871, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), 1.

²²⁷ “Ball Playing Among Indians,” 1-4.

²²⁸ File: 19 Halbert, H. S. Games of the Southern Indians; Their Tendency to Bet and Gamble, pp. 51-57, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-4294, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²²⁹ File: 52 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Games, pp. 11, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

done with their game, the women would get ready in much the same way as the men. They wore a little more in the way of clothing, covering their intimates, but they too painted their bodies and wore feathers, just as the men. There was no difference in the way the men and women's ballgames were played. The women's game was just as aggressive and violent, but all in good fun.²³⁰

These stickball games were really a community event, more so than just a game. The games could go on for hours, and if they ran out of daylight, they simply resumed play the next day. Choctaw men set the date for the game, giving them plenty of time to practice for the game and the women time to prepare food. Choctaws ate and socialized together before the game, and this was all part of the ritual leading up to it. The gambling was a big part of the game as well.²³¹ It included more community members than just the players and made the game more crowd-interactive.

Being a sporting event, stickball was a little more timeless than some of the other recreational activities of Choctaws. Pottery was difficult to make, and with a new source that was more durable and did not require all the effort, it made sense that it would become antiquated. Stickball, however, was just a fun game, that did not become obsolete with the changing times. Stickball could be played with as few as sixteen players on a team or as many as fifty, and it could be played on any flat surface that could serve as a field. In fact, when schools moved onto Choctaw territory, adults used their grounds to play stickball.²³² Stickball could adapt to the changes that faced it.

²³⁰ File: 42 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Stories, pp. 14, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-2137, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²³¹ File: 52 Halbert, H. S. Choctaw Games, pp. 5-20, *Papers of Henry Sale Halbert, 1837–1916*. Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Department of Archives and History, M-3001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, William F. Winter Archives and History Building, Jackson, MS.

²³² Kidwell, "The Choctaw Struggle," 85.

Eventually, players stopped painting and feathering themselves, but that did not interfere with the ballgame itself.²³³ Aside from the aesthetics of the game, there was nothing about the game, itself, that clashed with the new century.

As Choctaws moved into that complicated time where they had to live a dual life as a separate and distinct group, while also being able move with white Americans into the twentieth century, stickball became an important marker of Choctaw identity. The game had long been associated as a specifically American Indian game, and it helped them to reaffirm the differences between themselves and white and black Mississippians. The Choctaws' white neighbors enjoyed watching the ballgames, and for the Indians, it helped show there was a place for Choctaws in Mississippi. They had kept their community intact, even after the Removals, and they could interact peacefully with their neighbors.²³⁴

Virtually every other Choctaw recreational activity at one point or another was on the verge of extinction except for stickball. At no time in their history did Choctaws lose interest in their game. Stickball served many other functions besides just being a game, but first and foremost it was a game that was greatly enjoyed and played for fun. Choctaw men and women did not play primarily to reaffirm their identity, but it was a positive consequence.²³⁵ Stickball was altered in some ways, but the integrity of the game was always kept intact. On the 1974 schedule of events for the Choctaw Indian Fair, there was a stickball game scheduled for every night. Stickball teams were more formally organized and they no longer painted themselves or wore feathers, but the same

²³³ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 22-24.

²³⁴ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 21.

²³⁵ Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence*, 21.

basic rules of the game had not changed. Choctaws took pride in their ancestral game, and they billed it in the schedule as, “the grand-daddy of all sports.”²³⁶

Other recreational activities emerged as American influences permeated the Choctaw reservation. In 1955, a new pageant was added to the Choctaw Indian Fair, the Choctaw Indian Princess Pageant. It was similar to the Miss America and state pageants held around the nation, including a formal wear competition, interview, onstage question and talent.²³⁷ The pageant became an annual part of the Choctaw Indian Fair, and the princess became an ambassador for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Princesses traveled with the Choctaw chief to various political gatherings across the country, and she attended other social gatherings or special events. When Linda Willis, the 1973 Choctaw Princess, was asked how she thought the tribe felt about having Choctaw Princess, she responded that she had only received positive feedback. Linda said that older Choctaws told her they liked having her as a representative.²³⁸ The Choctaw Indian Princess pageant was inspired by an American recreational activity, but Choctaws made the pageant reflective of their values and meaningful to them. Through the pageant, Choctaw girls became better educated about their heritage and legacy as Choctaw women. They worked on customary Choctaw crafts, dances and brushed up on their history of the tribe.²³⁹ Choctaw princesses got the chance to promote their culture and be a face for their people. What started as a pageant became much more important than a contest.

²³⁶ Willard Bacon, “Preview of the ’74 Choctaw Indian Fair,” 53.

²³⁷ “Choctaw Indian Princess Pageant,” *Choctaw Indian Fair*, <http://www.choctawindianfair.com/pageant/index.html>.

²³⁸ Interview with Linda Willis, August 29, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1-6.

²³⁹ Interview with Karen Lilly, October 1, 1979, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 9-12.

Euro-Americans and Choctaw Indians had different conventional celebrations for special events. Choctaw Indians did not celebrate birthdays as a special occasion, but their neighbors' celebrations soon infiltrated the Choctaw celebratory calendar. It was a slow and gradual process, and even when accomplished, still looked radically different. Americans celebrated birthdays with parties, sweets and presents. In an interview with a Choctaw grandmother, Callie Dixon, Callie could not recall her birthday, and this was not distressing. She did not know what day she was born or how old she was, but to her it was not important.²⁴⁰ Birthday celebrations were not a part of her culture. For the younger generations of Choctaws, birthdays were not much more important. When Linda Willis was asked if anything special happened on birthdays, she replied, "No, not really. It's like this coming Monday is my birthday, and I was asking for to have a birthday dinner, and my mother is going to fix some corn to make some hominy for that."²⁴¹ That was all the celebration that would be held on a birthday, even in the 1970s. Choctaw children did not expect elaborate parties and presents. For Linda, a meal of hominy was enough to mark the occasion. Birthdays were another example of how Choctaws allowed certain American influences, but made them their own.

Certain elements of twentieth-century American popular culture and sports made their way into Choctaw society unadulterated. In her interview, Linda Willis said that some of her favorite recreational activities were listening to records by Al Green and the Supremes and riding around in her car. These were activities kids across America

²⁴⁰ Interview with Callie Dixon, June 28, 1975, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 1.

²⁴¹ Interview with Linda Willis, August 29, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 7-8.

participated in, and Choctaw kids of the same age were no different. Linda also participated in extracurricular activities, including track and basketball. Like music, sports provided Choctaw youth with fun recreational activities.²⁴² They were not concerned with whether their time was spent doing “Choctaw things” or not. They enjoyed diversions in their free time, whatever their origin was.

Participation in Choctaw recreational activities declined as times changed and other forms of entertainment emerged. However, at the end of the twentieth century, customary Choctaw dances and artistry remained because small segments of Choctaw society worked to keep and pass down the cultural practices. Like other aspects of Choctaw life, Choctaw recreational activities have had to adapt to exist in their new environment. Women switched to commercial dyes for coloring their baskets, but their baskets were still Choctaw. At the close of the twentieth century, many Choctaw recreational activities, like dancing, were only put on display for special occasions, but the cultural practices remained safe from extinction because of Choctaw commitment to preserving their unique identity and culture.

²⁴² Interview with Linda Willis, August 29, 1973, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*, Oral History Collections, (George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, Gainesville, Florida, 2005), 5.

Conclusion

The time from post-Removal to the end of the twentieth century marked a period of significant change for the Mississippi Choctaws. The Choctaw's culture was under continued pressure in the face of American efforts to dispossess them of their remaining lands and assimilate them into mainstream society. The Choctaws also faced poverty, racial discrimination and further removals by the United States government. The changing world around the Choctaws signaled to them a need to change, as well, but on their own terms. The Choctaws had to decide what they wanted their lives to look like in this new world. Their situation was forced upon them, but in that situation they still had some means of choice. Choctaw men and women made conscientious decisions to continue in customary ways, adopt new ones or find a balance between the two. Because Choctaw men and women lived their lives largely in separate spheres, it was up to Choctaw women to decide how they would adapt their ways to new challenges. Through their efforts, Choctaw women preserved and kept conventional Choctaw practices in use, but also opened up new doors of opportunity for themselves.

By the 1970s, Choctaw women had a lot of options for the kinds of work they wanted to do. Some women chose to work inside the home, a job that Choctaw women had long been responsible for. Other Choctaw women took up jobs away from the domestic sphere in business, hospitals and other places of work. Choctaw women had customarily been in an equal partnership with men, sharing the workload with their husbands. While the type of work done differed by the 1970s, their structure of

complementarity remained intact. Choctaw men and women both performed work to support their family. The change in women's work was largely a response to the changing economic environment. Most women were no longer able to support their families working in the home and doing subsistence-level farming, but they could support them in other fields of work. While the visible elements of Choctaw women's work changed, fundamentally Choctaw women still ascribed to customary roles of complementary work, at the end of the twentieth century. Choctaw women were able to take a cultural practice and adapt it to fit into their new world, and this was how they approached transitioning other aspects of their lives into the modern era.

In Choctaw custom, the domestic sphere was the domain of Choctaw women. Their domestic roles included taking care of the house, raising children, feeding their family, and accommodating any guests who stayed in their home. From 1830 to 1970, new technologies were invented and the Choctaw house began to resemble that of their white neighbors, but the roles of the Choctaw women remained largely the same. Choctaw women still raised children and cooked for their families, even if they worked outside of the home. In the home, women blended new American dishes like pudding with customary Choctaw meals of hominy. The domestic sphere remained the domain of Choctaw women, and here they chose what pieces of American influence they would accept and what cultural practices of the Choctaws they would continue. The Choctaw woman's home, on a small scale, represented the ways in which women maintained their cultural practices while adding new elements.

As American influence made its way into Choctaw society, the Choctaw matrilineal kinship system and cosmology were traded out for the Euro-American

bilateral kinship system and Christianity. These were big changes, but Choctaw women made the best of this situation. Choctaw mothers firmly held onto their roles orchestrating marriages for their children, even though after the change in the family organization structure they had to share the responsibilities with their husbands. The Christian church became a new source of informal power in the Choctaw community, and by converting and taking on active roles in the church, Choctaw women linked themselves with this new institution of power. Through their kinship ties, women exerted their influence. In the latter part of the twentieth century, for example, Choctaw women used their churches to provide childcare so they could work. In many ways, the church gave women a foothold from which to work to better their position and provide for their families.

Before 1945, Choctaw women did not enjoy a formal place in Choctaw politics and were relegated to the sphere of influence whereby they might persuade male relatives to act in a certain manner, but did not have the power to do so themselves. Although Choctaw women's opinions were well respected, the words they said did not count when it came time to vote. It was only after the 1945 Constitution that their opinions carried the weight of a vote. This change was welcomed by Choctaw women, who quickly made their way onto the Tribal Council. This change showed a clear shift from Choctaw women's customary ways of influence to real positions of leadership. Choctaw women became leaders in their community in a way that they had never been able to do before.

With the exception of pottery, the majority of recreational activities of Choctaw women persisted, even into the 1970s. Choctaw women still played stickball and engaged in artistry, including basketry and beadwork. Choctaw women and men danced

to the drum that beat their time-honored tunes and passed along this knowledge to the younger generations. The Choctaws celebrated and even made economic use of their cultural practices through the Choctaw Indian Fair. There, Choctaws performed dances and showed off and sold their baskets and beadwork. In this way, they were able to simultaneously preserve their cultural practices while using those practices to bolster their economic and political status as a separate people in Mississippi.

Choctaw women also came to embrace some American recreational activities and make them their own. The Choctaw Indian Princess Pageant, though born of American influence, became an important Choctaw event, and the princess became an ambassadorial figure for the Mississippi Choctaws. The Choctaw Princess was important not just to women, but to all Choctaws. She acted as a spokesperson for the Mississippi Choctaws, promoting their culture and heritage. Other American influences, like popular music and basketball, made their way into Choctaw's free time, especially among the younger generations.

By the 1970s, Choctaw women enjoyed a variety of activities, from conventional to hybrid to foreign. It was significant, though, that even when new options arose, Choctaw women chose to hang onto their culture. For Choctaw women, the recreational activities of their ancestors were important and meaningful. Their artistry and games defined them as a separate group, as the Mississippi Choctaws. Participating actively in that history was something that modern Choctaw women wanted to hold on to, and so they did. These activities were important because they were part of what made them Choctaws.

Choctaw women defined their own identity, and their practices were an expression of that identity. They molded, adapted and continued cultural practices to define and re-define that which they felt was the best expression of their identity. In all these areas of life and work, Choctaw women were active in the decision-making process. Much change came from outside influences, but they did not let that take away their agency or self-determination. Choctaw women made a variety of choices about how they wanted to live their lives. Some chose to hold tightly to their cultural practices, others ventured into new areas, and still others blended custom and change to make the best of their new circumstances. Importantly, each choice, was the Choctaw woman's own decision. There was no singular story of Choctaw women, but all their stories showed a deep and ongoing commitment to their identity as Mississippi Choctaws. By examining their stories, we gain deeper insight into how this particular group of indigenous women actively worked within the confines of their circumstances to survive and thrive as a distinct ethnic and political community over more than a century of change.

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