

Linda Southerland
Second Vice President/Educational Chairman

Educational – The Chickasaw Nation

November 3, 2012

When statehood came to Oklahoma in 1907, my people, the Chickasaws, were living in an area between Red River and the Canadian River in what was then the southwestern part of Indian Territory. That area today is the south-central part of Oklahoma.

The land in Indian Territory had not always been home to them, however. Only since the 1830s, when the heartbreaking Treaties of the Removal forced them west of the Mississippi River, had the Chickasaw people resided in this location.

Before that time, the Chickasaw's vast domain had extended northward from the northern portions of the present states of Mississippi and Alabama to the Ohio River and eastward from the Mississippi River to the headwaters of Elk River in what is now the state of Tennessee.

That was the old homeland of the Chickasaw Indians. That was where the people were living when the first Europeans--De Soto and his party--passed through their country in the winter of 1540 and '41 on their way to discovering the Mississippi River. That was the land on which the ancestors had lived and died for untold centuries.

Yet the story of this Muskogean tribe of Indians, according to an old Chickasaw legend, stretches back into time even farther. The legend reveals that long before the people were ever known as the Chickasaw, they dwelt in a land far to the west of the Mississippi.

This Chickasaw legend of The Beginning goes like this: IN A TIME long since past, there lived somewhere in the West a tribe of Indians constantly warred upon by a powerful enemy. Because of the never ending attacks, the people of this tribe enjoyed little of the peace and comfort for which they so deeply yearned.

In time, the families who lived nearest the enemy and who, over the years, had borne the brunt of enemy assaults became so weary and heavy-hearted that they appealed to their wise prophets to find a solution to the problem.

The men of wisdom held a special consultation. They sat around the council fire and deliberated for many hours, and, most important, they sought guidance from (Ubabeneli) Aba Binili, The Creator of all things, who sat above the clouds and directed the destiny of all.

At last, the prophets concluded their deliberations. They summoned their fellow tribesmen and told them of the decision they had reached.

The people, said the wise men, would seek a new home where they could find peace and happiness. Their guide to the new land would be a kohta falaya (long pole). This kohta falaya, though, was no ordinary pole. It was something extra special, for it had been made sacred by Aba Binili. (Ubabeneli)

At the end of each day's journey, the prophets explained, the sacred pole would be stuck into the ground so that it stood perfectly straight. Each morning the pole would be carefully examined, and in whatever direction it was leaning, that would be the direction of travel.

That procedure was to be repeated until the kohta falaya leaned no more. And when that happened, the people would know it was a divine sign from Aba Binili Ubabeneli that their journey was over, and their new home had been reached.

Then the prophets told them the people would be split into two groups to make traveling safer and easier and that the brave young chief called Chickasaw would lead one party and his equally brave brother Choctaw, also a chief, would lead the other.

The people listened intently. They liked what they heard. The words of optimism which fell from the tongues of the wise men lifted their spirits immeasurably and when the talks ended, the elated people started dancing and singing, continuing to rejoice until the early hours of morning.

During the next few days, the families busied themselves packing their meager belongings and making other necessary preparations for the journey. At last, the eve of departure arrived.

That evening the prophets stuck the kohta falaya into the ground and then retired for the night; the next morning, at the break of day, the long pole was closely inspected and found to be leaning toward the east.

So with Chief Chickasaw at the head of one of the parties and Chief Choctaw heading the other, the two-headed colony bade farewell to the remainder of the tribe and set out in the direction of the rising sun.

It was a sight to behold, this great Indian caravan: Old men and old women, boys and girls, young braves and young maidens, husbands and their wives--some with newborn babies, others with babies yet unborn--all moving along on foot with their few worldly possessions, each knowing with certainty that somewhere a new homeland awaited them and by-and-by the sacred long pole would lead them to it.

Far in front of this procession of red people ranged a large white dog. He darted to the right, then to the left; he was everywhere, always on the alert. The people loved the big creature very dearly. He was their faithful guard and scout, and it was his duty to sound the alarm should enemies be encountered.

Travel was slow and laborious. Every evening found migrating Indians only a short distance from where they had commenced that day's journey. Even so, each day's walk took the people farther and farther from their old homeland, until, in time, they found themselves passing through the homelands of other red people--red people who eyed them with suspicion and considered them intruders.

Sometimes the weary travelers were allowed to pass unmolested through these foreign domains, but more often than not they were set upon by the jealous guardians of their ancestral lands and forced to fight their way through.

Sickness was a constant companion of marchers, and the tribal doctors stayed busy digging into their medicine bags. But when senti, the snake, struck any one of them, the big white dog was quickly summoned and had only to lick the wound to make the victim well again.

Yet, even with the extraordinary healing powers of the medicine men and the beloved white dog, the ugly hand of death reached down into the double-headed colony of red people and took away loved ones at will.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. And then one day, just as the sun was setting, the two parties of Indians came upon a scene beyond their imagination. It was a great river, the likes of which they had never seen before, and the unexpected sight overwhelmed them.

For a long time the astonished people stood on the riverbank and stared in awe at the mighty watercourse. They called the giant river misha sipokoni (beyond all age); today, that great river is known far and wide as the Mississippi.

That night the families sat around their campfires and talked joyfully to one another. Many of the people believed the promised land had been reached and felt certain the sacred long pole would confirm their belief at daybreak.

But at sun up the next day, the homeless people saw that the kohta falaya still leaned toward the east, and they knew that "home" was somewhere on the other side of the wide, wide river before them.

The tribesmen hurriedly set about constructing rafts, and soon the crossing was underway. Almost immediately a serious mishap occurred which left the Indians very sad. The raft carrying their beloved white dog came to pieces in the middle of the river, and though all the people were quickly rescued, the big dog, which managed to climb onto a piece of broken timber, could not be reached. The people could only watch helplessly as he was swept downstream and out of sight. That was the last the Indians ever saw of their faithful guard and scout.

Many days were required to ferry all the people and their belongings to the opposite side, but, in time, the difficult crossing was completed.

The families rested by the river several days, then packed up and continued their eastward march. Some weeks later they camped at a certain place, which later became known as (Nanih Waya), in what is now Winston County, Mississippi. At daylight the following morning, the people found the kohta falaya wobbling around crazily, leaning first in one direction and then another.

The migrants became somewhat excited--and uneasy, too--for they had never before seen the sacred long pole behave in such a strange manner. At last the kohta falaya grew very still and stood perfectly straight.

At this point, the two brothers--Chief Chickasaw and Chief Choctaw--had their first difference of opinion. Chief Choctaw, as well as some of the prophets, was quite satisfied that the perfectly erect pole was the divine sign from Ubabeneli that their new home had been reached. Chief Chickasaw on the other hand, was not at all pleased with the way the sacred pole had wobbled around, and he felt certain the promised land lay farther toward the rising sun.

Discussions on the matter were held by the two chiefs and the prophets, but at the end of several hours, opinions remained unchanged. Seeing that talking was getting them no place, Chief Chickasaw pulled the sacred long pole from the ground and commanded all those who believed the promised land lay farther to the east to pick up their packs and follow him. That was the beginning of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian Nations. From that day on Chief Chickasaw's followers, who were relatively few compared to the great number who remained in camp, were referred to as Chickasaws, and those who stayed with Chief Choctaw were called Choctaws.

After leading the Chickasaws farther eastward to various parts of what are now states of Alabama and Georgia, the kohta falaya reversed its direction and guided the people westward to a place in the vicinity of the present-day towns of Pontotoc and Tupelo, Mississippi; and there, less than a hundred miles north of where the Choctaws had settled, the sacred long pole stood straight as an arrow. The Chickasaw people then knew with certainty that at last they had found their new homeland and that their long journey was at an end.

as told By the Reverend Jess J. Humes
to Robert Kingsberry

Reverend Humes was born November 25, 1887 at Tishomingo, Indian Territory, the old capital of the Chickasaw Nation. In July of 1935, at the age of forty-seven, he became a Methodist minister and served faithfully not only his own people, but also the Coctaws until his retirement in affairs and welfare of his fellow Indians. This highly respected senior citizen was one of the eight members of Chickasaw Governor Overton James Advisory Council. Reverend Humes and his wife made their home at Wapanucka, Oklahoma, some twenty miles northeast of Tishomingo.