

# CHICKASAW EDUCATION AND MURRAY STATE COLLEGE

*By Margaret H. Lokey and Beverly J. Wyatt\**

Located on the campus of Murray State College is the West dormitory, known as Bessie Poe Hall, standing in brooding silence overlooking the attractive school. The unusual exterior is reminiscent of some European architecture with the combination of brick, mortar, and pebble and inlaid wooden design. The clear brightness in the building streams from a large fourth floor skylight flooding the stairwell, bringing cheerful warmth to the interior. Wandering through the echoing lobby, hallways, and rooms, areas of crumbling plaster reveal detailed wire mesh and lath construction. In some of the students' rooms, there are a few dust-covered iron beds and chests-of-drawers that were part of the original furnishings. Golden hardwood floors throughout most of the building are in fair to good condition.

From the concrete porch and directly down a sidewalk leading through an aisle of magnolia trees is a glimpse of a monument to William H. Murray, who played a major role in the erection of the dormitory, as well as in the establishment of agriculture institutions throughout the state. There is a feeling of suspense, as if the old Chickasaw building has assumed a personality all its own and is waiting for a sentence of preservation or demolition. It waits with hope.

Today, in what once was the capital of the Chickasaw Nation, this monument to the tribe's determination to educate its young people in the new ways awaits its fate. It will either fall demolished into dust or be restored and preserved as a living monument to a proud people who turned their backs on many of the old ways and set out to adapt to the white man's culture, while retaining and cherishing the ancient values of their Indian heritage.

It is difficult for those unfamiliar with Chickasaw history to understand the important role education has played since the first Chickasaw boy, Pitman Colbert, attended a school in Maryland in 1803. He subsequently became one of the leading men in his nation.

The Chickasaws were not a nomadic tribe. Their early lands encompassed sections of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky, where they lived in permanent log houses clustered in towns, and had both winter and summer homes. They planted and tilled crops and were noted for their outstanding skills in marathon running, and as both hunters and

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Bloomfield Academy, one of the many schools built by the Chickasaws (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

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warriors. Their first contact with white men as a tribe was in 1540 when Hernando de Soto and his army wintered in Chickasaw lands before continuing their exploration of the West. When spring came, de Soto's unreasonable demands on the chiefs and headmen were so extensive and unfair, that the Chickasaw warriors were ordered to descend on the Spanish army which were sent running in terror completely demoralized by the Indians. Twelve Spaniards were killed. The Chickasaws were simply protecting their people and their food stores. French explorers and traders from Louisiana also incurred the wrath of the Chickasaws. The Chickasaw Nation was never conquered by invading tribes or foreign armies. They were much feared, attesting to the outstanding bravery of their warriors and battle tactics.

It is believed by many historians that the Battle of Akia in 1736, in which French armies moved down the Mississippi River from Canada and up the Mississippi from Louisiana, was an important turning point in the history of the United States. The Chickasaw warriors' bravery in ferocious battles defeated both armies. This stopped the French from controlling the Mississippi River, gateway to the West, and preserved the country for their English-speaking friends. The Chickasaws learned much from the white people, and due to their advanced culture and civilization, were named among the Five Civilized Tribes.

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By 1820 missionaries began moving into the Chickasaw Nation and established schools for their children. The progressive Chickasaws easily and quickly adapted to the ways of the white people. Some became quite wealthy with extensive plantation land holdings and numerous slaves. Many adopted the dress and fashion of the time. The realization that education and knowledge was important for their very survival grew within the tribe. Prior to removal to the West (Indian Territory, now Oklahoma) in 1837, a number a Chickasaw boys were being educated at the Choctaw Academy located at Blue Springs, Scott County, Kentucky.

Following removal, the Chickasaws lived among the Choctaws for several years. The Chickasaws were greatly outnumbered in population, about five-to-one, and were generally unhappy with the situation. They were not willing to build homes, churches, and schools on the lands of another tribe; and it was not until December, 1844, that Congress passed a bill to establish a Chickasaw Manual Training School. The school was to be under the joint care of the tribe and the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and was to be located near the present town of Tishomingo. Due to many setbacks, including illness and inclement weather, the school did not open until 1851. Meanwhile, several Chickasaw boys were attending Delaware College, Newark, Delaware (later the University of Delaware) while others attended Plainsfield Academy in Plainsfield, Connecticut.

The Chickasaw Nation was officially established in the south central section of Indian Territory in 1855 with a governor and a bicameral legislature. They had their own courts, law enforcement officers, and other officials including a tribal superintendent of schools. Tishomingo City became the capital of the nation.

Twenty-six neighborhood schools were established throughout the nation. Faculty members were required to meet standards set by the tribal superintendent of schools. Not just anyone could open a school. Construction of schools varied from crude one-room log school houses to modern buildings of the period. English was the language of instruction generally, although Chickasaw might be the prevailing language of the community.

Several academies were established and well attended. They included the Chickasaw Manual Training School for Boys, later Harley Institute; Wapanucka Academy; Bloomfield Seminary, a school for girls; Colbert Institute, later Collins Institute; and Lebanon Academy, an orphans' home.

Most of the academy buildings were elaborate in design and structure, three to four stories high, of wood frame, brick, granite, and/or limestone construction. Originally they were staffed by missionaries from both the

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Methodist and Presbyterian churches, later by educated members of the tribe.

Very few white children living in the nation received any education at all. There were few subscription schools. In 1898 five-sixths (5/6) of the school population, or 51,918 children, were white youngsters who were without organized school facilities. Two sisters presently living in Tishomingo (1980) described their childhood at Pontotoc prior to statehood. They said white children envied Indian children because they had schools to attend, and they could hardly wait every year for the Indian children to be dismissed for vacation so the white children could use the school house for what little education they received.

The Chickasaws realized the only way to beat the white man's system was to be better educated than their white contemporaries. The more educated and sophisticated Chickasaws were greatly interested in government, history, political science, and law, as well as other fields. Many became outstanding leaders in their chosen careers.

From the educational system of the Chickasaw Nation emerged several United States Congressmen, two Governors of the State of Oklahoma—William H. Murray, an intermarried Chickasaw, and Johnston Murray, his son and a Chickasaw by blood—state senators and representatives, distinguished judges, and those honorable men and women who dedicated their lives to the teaching profession from grade school through the college level.

An outstanding Chickasaw, Charles Carter of Ardmore, was the first congressman elected to the United States House of Representatives from his district. In a speech at Bug Tussle School near McAlester, Congressman Carter stated that if an Indian boy could grow up to be a congressman, surely one of the children in the school could also be elected to Congress. One of the children in the audience at Bug Tussle was Carl Albert, who, as Speaker of the House of Representatives, attained the highest national office ever held by an Oklahoman. To this day, Speaker Albert maintains that the catalyst for his distinguished career was Congressman Carter's speech in that small rural school so many years ago.

The advent of statehood in 1907 sounded the death knell for the Chickasaws as a sovereign nation and for the Indian schools as well. Certain members of the Chickasaw Nation, however, played important roles in the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention, especially William H. Murray of Tishomingo, who was elected chairman. It was mainly through his efforts that several agricultural schools were established throughout the state. One of these was Murray State School of Agriculture (now Murray State College) in Tishomingo.

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Tishomingo, capital of the Chickasaw Nation and the future location of Murray State College (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

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Murray School first opened its doors in the fall of 1908 as a secondary school. The City of Tishomingo vacated one of two public school buildings to accommodate the students. The school enrollment was composed primarily of Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian boys, due mainly to an agreement with the Department of the Interior that tribal funds would be paid for their support.

Eighty acres of land for the site of the agriculture school was purchased by Tishomingo businessmen for \$2,000 and deeded to the State of Oklahoma. In 1909 the Administration and Classroom Building was completed. This building, still in use, has been remodeled twice.

During the transition period, white students were integrated into the agriculture institution. Out-of-town students lived in boarding houses or private homes in Tishomingo. There was a great need for student housing. In March, 1917, a bill was introduced into Congress by then Congressman William H. Murray whereby two Indian dormitories would be erected on the Murray State School campus.

In his *Memoirs of Governor Murray and a True History of Oklahoma*, Volume 3, Murray states that Oklahoma Governor R. L. Williams "exercised too much personal hate against individuals that caused him to destroy the Haskell Agricultural School at Broken Arrow and the Connell Agricultural School at Helena. He said he intended to destroy the Murray



Bessie Poe Hall shortly after construction in 1920 (Courtesy of Margaret H. Lokey).

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State School at Tishomingo. Realizing that, I hurriedly put through Congress a bill to construct two dormitories at the Murray State School, which proved embarrassing to the Governor and it was saved thereby."

Congressional Records for the Sixty-fourth Congress, dated March 2, 1917, Session II, Chapter 146, Section 18, Paragraph 2, under the heading FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES says:

The Secretary of the Interior is hereby authorized to withdraw from the Treasury of the United States, at his discretion, the sum of \$50,000, or so much thereof as may be necessary, of the funds on deposit to the credit of the Chickasaw Tribe of Indians, and to use the same for constructing and equipping dormitories at the Murray State School of Agriculture at Tishomingo, Oklahoma, at a cost not to exceed said sum, for the accommodation of Chickasaw children and, in the discretion of the Secretary of the Interior, of any other pupils attending said school: Provided, That this appropriation shall become available after the said city of Tishomingo shall have donated and conveyed by fee simple title to said tribe suitable and necessary sites upon which same are to be constructed.

Thus through a direct order of Congress to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, and the influence of then Chickasaw Governor Douglas H. Johnston, tribal funds were made available and used to finance construction and furnish the two dormitories at an eventual cost of \$58,845.75.

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This view of the west side of Bessie Poe Hall illustrates the sound condition of the ornate structure. Hopefully, the historic building will be preserved as a reminder of early education in southeastern Oklahoma (Courtesy Margaret Lokey).

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The buildings were identical in appearance. The only obvious exceptions were a dining room located in the West dormitory basement, where students and faculty were served family-style meals, and two chimneys on the West dormitory, one for steam heating system, the other believed to have been for kitchen facilities. The East dormitory had only one chimney.

For many years the buildings were occupied by male Chickasaw, Choctaw, and white students and were known as the East and West Boys' Dormitories. In 1922–1923, the late Colonel Clive E. Murray and his wife were houseparents and lived in the West dormitory. Mrs. Murray described the facilities as comfortable, and the family-style meals in the busy dining room as “delicious.” She said that “Boys will be boys” and there was mischief from time to time that was treated with understanding discipline.

Colonel Murray, a nephew of William H. Murray, was appointed president of the institution in 1931. His distinguished career with the United States Army was second only to that as school administrator. He served brilliantly during World War I in Europe where, among many other honors, he was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* with Palms by France. He was

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a graduate of Murray State School of Agriculture, and served as an instructor following advanced university degrees prior to his appointment as president. Meanwhile, he continued in the army reserve and was named State Director of Selective Service for Oklahoma during both World War II and the Korean Conflict. He is only one of many distinguished former students of Murray State School of Agriculture.

Owing to increasing demands for higher standards and grade of work, the State Board of Agriculture by resolution in the spring of 1922 authorized the school to add a year of college work during the 1922–1923 session and another year the session of 1923–1924, thus raising it to the rank of a junior college. The last high school class of two students graduated in 1943.

In 1930 the school annual identified the East dormitory as Douglas H. Johnston Hall, then honorary Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, and the West dormitory as Chickasaw Hall. In 1937 a bill was introduced in the Oklahoma House of Representatives whereby the state would purchase the two dormitories from the Chickasaw Nation. No official action was taken until 1939 when the sale was concluded and the tribe was paid \$32,308.00 for the two buildings, contents, and the site on which they stood.

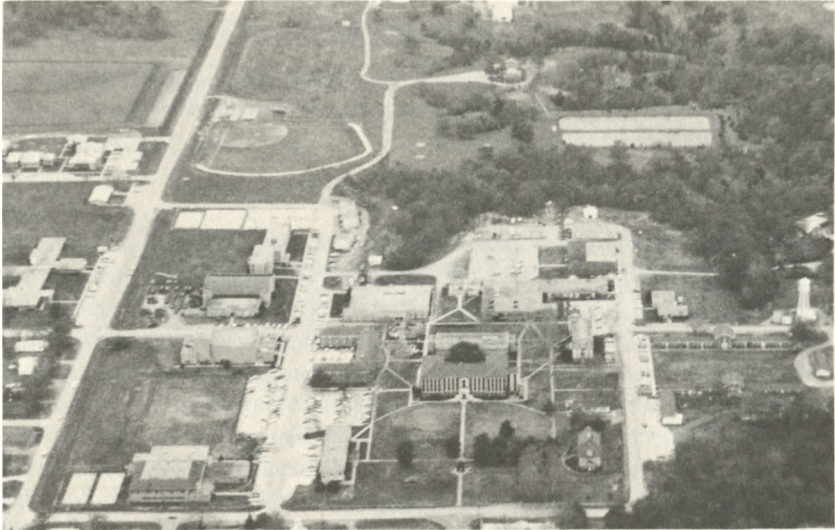
After statehood the government usually discouraged Indian influences whenever possible. It was not popular to be an Indian, even a "civilized" one. After the state purchased the buildings, the names were changed again through an election of the student body and alumni honoring two students, Bessie Poe and James Hicks, both of whom were deceased. James Hicks, known as "Chi-Chi," was a Chickasaw agricultural student at the time of his death.

Following World War II, James Hicks Hall was used principally as an athletic dormitory. In 1957 the building was destroyed by fire, the cause believed to have been faulty electrical wiring. Thankfully, no one was injured. Bessie Poe Hall became a girls' dormitory, later a men's athletic dorm. Problems with deterioration of the interior, particularly the steam heating system, caused the building to be vacated by students in 1972. It has since been used for storage.

This lovely old building, unusual in architectural design and long a local historical landmark, deserves preservation, not to honor loyal faculty or houseparents, not to honor former students, but to honor the integrity and tenacity of members of the Chickasaw Indian Nation in their eager and eternal quest for knowledge, for developing early culture of the tribe to include formal education as a means to a better future, and to guarantee the Chickasaw Indian Nation forever will be remembered in the field of education.



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Looking south over the campus of Murray State College, Bessie Poe Hall can be seen in the lower right corner, just northwest of the main administration building (Courtesy Margaret Lokey).

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President James Monroe wrote to the Chickasaw chiefs and head men from Washington, May 24, 1824, in regard to their schools: "My Children. You have taken a wise step, you have done what all good men and wise men will approve of. You have agreed to apply your annuity . . . for the improvement of your children."

"This is wisdom. . . ."

The fall semester of 1980 showed thirteen percent of the 1,449 students enrolled at Murray State College were of Indian descent, as well as several faculty and staff members. The students represent twenty-four tribes from Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Montana. A major in Indian Studies, an Indian Awareness Program, and an active Native American Club are of particular interest.

Overton James, Governor of the Chickasaw Indian Nation, says the Chickasaws have supported educational advancement for nearly 200 years, and it remains a top priority. As James states, "A look at Murray State College is just one example of emphasis on higher education among our own tribe. There is an old Indian proverb that says 'An Indian without education is like an eagle with a broken wing.' We take that proverb to heart, and we will always support educational programs, not only among the Chickasaws, but all Indian peoples."

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