

JANE McCURTAIN

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The history of the Choctaw Nation in the last half of the nineteenth century is very closely wound about the life of Jane McCurtain. She, more than any one individual, influenced the making of it. During this transition period, the Choctaws, along with the other Indians of the Indian Territory, were laying the foundation for the part they have played since statehood. And one recalls the prophecy of the great Pushmataha after the signing of the treaty at Doak's Stand, "The time will come when the highly improved Choctaw shall hold office in the councils of the Great Nation of White People, and in its wars with the nations of the earth mixed up in the armies of the white man the fierce war whoops of the Choctaw warriors shall strike terror into the hearts of the invading foes."

When the Choctaws came west to their new home one of the settlements centered around Fort Towson. This settlement was a subdivision of the old Choctaw nation known as Towson County. It was here in 1842 that Jane Austin was born. Lewis Austin, her father, had, like all progressive men of his tribe, gone about the task of making a living in this new country with a desire of making a permanent home for himself and his family. He had mills, gins, a tannery, and everything that was needed to make living comfortable. Lewis Austin was a full blood Choctaw and his mechanical skill was extra-ordinary for one of his race. He was a very capable man in many respects; his friends and neighbors believed him to be a genius, when it came to making things. Jane Austin's mother was Mollie Webster, who was one-quarter white. Both Lewis Austin and his wife were desirous of giving their children the best education that could be had.

Wheelock Academy had been established in 1832 by Reverend Allen Wright. His vision and aim were to give an opportunity to the Choctaw girls to become educated Christian women, and toward that goal he labored.

The year in which Jane Austin was born the Choctaw National Council at Nanih Waya made its first appropriation for the support of the Female Seminary at Wheelock. No doubt but this act had much to do with the education of Jane Austin. At this council in 1842 an appropriation was made for the establishment of neighborhood schools, also. In the matter of education the Choctaws were becoming very serious. It was a problem of national concern.

When Jane Austin was eleven years old she entered Wheelock Academy. The Reverend Allen Wright had just died and John Edwards, a descendant of the great Jonathan Edwards, was in charge. For five years she pursued her education with a great deal of promise. She had inherited her father's ability for doing things and for leadership. When she had finished at Wheelock, she was selected as one of the most promising and most capable girls of the Choctaw Nation to be given a scholarship so that she might continue her education in the schools of the "States." The custom of the Choctaws, along with the others of the Five Civilized Tribes, to send their most capable boys and girls to eastern colleges to be educated at the expense of the tribe, had long been established.

Jane Austin and her friend, Sophia Woods, were granted a scholarship to Eldgeworths Seminary, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and after three years they were graduated from that school and came back to the Choctaw Nation in 1861, just at the outbreak of the Civil war.

Jane Austin afterwards told of her experiences in her first introduction to the outside world. She went by steamboat by way of New Orleans and there took passage by train to Washington, D. C. She and Sophia Woods were accompanied by Israel Fulsom who was at that time delegate to Washington, representing the Choctaws. She told of her visit to the French market at New Orleans. Among the incidents of this particular visit, she observed sitting around displaying their wares, a group of people who resembled Indians. She walked up to them and spoke to them in English, and they replied in Choctaw. She answered in kind and thus quite a pleasant meeting was enjoyed by all. (It must be remembered in explanation that that part of Louisi-

ana lying east of the Mississippi river was a part of the Choctaw country prior to their removal west, beginning in 1830, and that a remnant of the Choctaws still live in that part of the world.)

Upon the inauguration of President Lincoln, March 4, 1861, it was evident to all that civil war was impending, and Israel Fulsom, who was still a delegate for the Choctaws at Washington, notified the girls that it was best to return home. They set out and the story of the wanderings in an effort to get home, is an episode in their lives not easily forgotten. After reaching Ft. Smith, Arkansas, Jane Austin set out by stage for Boggy Depot. She passed through Perryville, en route and crossed Muddy Boggy at Atoka. After reaching Boggy Depot (on Clear Boggy) she finally got conveyance to Armstrong Academy, four miles north of the present town of Bokchito. Experiencing some delay, she eventually got a way to go home and after two months of extreme inconvenience in travel she settled down.

In the fall of 1861, Jane Austin taught her first school near her home at Doakville. Many of the prominent men of the eighties and nineties went to school to "Miss Jane." But not until after her marriage to Jackson McCurtain did she have the opportunity to use the marked leadership which she possessed.

Jackson McCurtain, at the outbreak of the Civil war, was chosen Captain of the first Choctaw regiment, under General Cooper. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the Second Battalion before the war was over. At the end of the war he immediately took a prominent position in Choctaw National politics.

The following excerpt from a letter dated "Sugar Loaf County C. N. Aug. 12, 1865," by Jackson McCurtain gives an interesting account of some personal dealings with the federal forces after the war. This letter was written in the summer before their marriage in the fall:

"Dear Jane: I have been looking for your answer every day. I am getting uneasy. You are so far from me that I am afraid that I could not get to hear from you if anything was to happen. Therefore, Dear

Jane, write to me as soon as you get this and let me know all the circumstances with you.

“This is the third time I have been to Fort Smith and back. I have found out them Feds are hard customers. They are proving a great many horses and cattle away from the southern people. I had bought a two horse wagon in town the time I was there before the last, and this last time I took two mules along to get the wagon out, and when I got there with the mules they claimed the mules had (US) brand on them, which is not true. The sign they have is (JM), that is my own brand. I had to leave the mules there to have more investigation, which I have no doubt but that the mules will be restored to me but the principal is what hurts me. They may think that I am subjugated, if they do they are badly fooled. . . .

“I will have to hunt up what few of my stock is left and mark and brand them this fall. I never had much when the war commenced and now I am worse but will try and save what I can.

“I am staying here at my old place, forty-two miles from Ft. Smith on the old Towson road. When you write direct it to me at Sugar Loaf County C N.”

In September 1865 Jackson McCurtain attended Choctaw Council at Armstrong, and in November of the same year he and Jane Austin were married at her home near Doakville. They lived for the first years of their married life at an old place still standing about one mile east of Red Oak. Here they lived until 1868 when they moved to the old Zodiac Harrison place in what is now Choctaw county, which is situated one half mile northwest of Kent, seven miles down the highway from Antlers.

In the following year Jackson McCurtain was elected senator from Kiamichi county. He was fast becoming the leader of the Choctaws. In October, 1870, he was elected president of the senate. This office he held until the death of Chief Isaac Garvin. Then, according to the Choctaw constitution, he automatically became chief. At the next general election in the fall

of 1880, Jackson F. McCurtain was elected chief and was re-elected in 1882. During his chieftainship Jane McCurtain was his chief adviser and his personal secretary. His reliance upon her judgment was no secret. She wrote many of his state papers. Her loyalty to his best interests and that of her people, both politically and financially, is one of her outstanding achievements.

For a long time, in fact since the National Council held its last meeting at Nanih Waya in 1849, the Choctaw Nation had no established capital. Council had been held during the fifties at Doakville, and later on during the Civil war its meetings were held at Armstrong Academy. Now the time had come for the establishment of a permanent capital. The center of the Choctaw Nation was near the old capital Nanih Waya. One of the most interesting legends of the Choctaws centers around the name "Nanih Waya," meaning the "mountain produces," so called because tradition says that the Choctaws were created from the sacred "Nanih Waya" in Mississippi.

In 1883, during Jackson McCurtain's term of office (Tuskahoma) Tuskahoma was selected as the seat of government. This new location was only about a mile and one half away from the old capital. While the capital was being built the McCurtain family moved over to Tuskahoma.

When the Saint Louis and San Francisco railroad pushed in south across the Choctaw country it left the Choctaw capital off of its route. The story goes that the Choctaw council refused to pay the sum asked by the railroad to have the "iron horse" go by the capital, hence the town Tuskahoma came into existence about a few miles away.

During the year of Jackson McCurtain's chieftainship the Choctaws were becoming a progressive people. Coal mines, railroads, and the cattle industry were the problems which confronted them. These brought the white man. While the United States Government was dealing with the "Boomers" in Western Oklahoma, Jackson McCurtain and the Choctaw Council had their share of white invaders.

Here at his home in November, 1885, Jackson McCurtain died. He is buried in the old cemetery just a few yards from the capi-

tol ground. Inscribed on his monument is Jane McCurtain's estimation and appreciation of her husband :

“In Memoriam”

“An honest man here lies at rest
As e'er God with his image blest;
The friend of man, the friend of truth;
The friend of age, the friend of youth.
Few hearts like his with virtue warmed
Few hearts with knowledge so informed;
If there's another world he lives in bliss
If there is not he made the best of this.”

Mrs. McCurtain was a great woman. As long as her husband lived she stood in the background and served as his adviser. When he died she stepped up in his place and for thirty-nine years held that place as one of the most potent factors in the affairs of the Choctaw people. During the years of her husband's political career she had kept close to the national affairs, and after his death she was more interested. She stood equal to any man in the Choctaw Nation in her knowledge of political affairs. Her advice and aid in legislation was always sought.

Her home was near the Council House and in a way was the National Hotel, because here the law makers assembled and many stayed there during council. She was noted for her hospitality and sound judgment. Few measures of importance ever passed the legislature but what bear some earmark of her influence.

Mrs. McCurtain was a most striking example of an Indian woman who assimilated the education and civilization of the whites, and at the same time retained the hereditary instincts of her own race and an interest in them. She loved her people and their history, yet she worked for their education and their assimilation with the whites. She knew the time was near when the two races would have to live together and she worked to that end.

In 1891 two new boarding schools were established by the National Council. One was located very near Mrs. McCurtain's

home, a school for girls, the Tuskahoma Female Seminary. The companion school for boys, Jones Academy, was the other. In 1894 Mrs. McCurtain was selected superintendent at Jones Academy and remained there until the signing of the Atoka Agreement in 1898. By this act the United States Government took charge of the appointing of teachers to the Choctaw schools and dismissed most all of the Choctaw teachers and superintendents.

As superintendent of Jones Academy, Mrs. McCurtain came in touch with many of the men of Choctaw descent who are directing the affairs in eastern Oklahoma today. In looking over an old account book which she kept while at Jones one comes across names very well known, as Perry Willis, Alex McIntosh, Walter Leard, R. Pebworth, J. R. Culberson, and many others.

A program of the closing exercises at Jones Academy on June 2 and 3, 1898, the last in which Mrs. McCurtain was superintendent, contains some things of interest. It will be remembered that this was during the Spanish American War.

Program of Closing Exercises at

JONES ACADEMY,
June 2nd and 3d, 1898

Thursday Night

Invocation	J. P. Thompson
Piano Duet	Parade Review
Misses Wright and Frazier	
“Getting the Right Start,”	A. L. McIntosh
“Death-bed of Benedict Arnold,”	Simon Dwight
College Song	School
“Wisdom,”	A. B. Thompson
“Peter Sorghum in Love,”	T. B. Wall
“Hints for Home Student,”	T. H. Benton
Piano Solo	Miss Wright

DIALOGUE: “THIRTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.”

Cast of Characters:

Miss Jemima Jimscoozler,	Miss Ida McCurtain
Miss Lucy Jimscoozler (Jimima’s niece).....	Jacob Rosenthal

Bonaparte Boggs	T. B. Wall
Deacon Trotter	B. S. McIntire
“America,”	S. L. Loring
“Rowing Swiftly Down the Stream”	Collins Coe
Chorus Class	
“The Vision of Mirza”	B. S. McIntire
“The Value of Time and Knowledge”	R. E. Lee
“The Dream of Aldarin”	C. P. Intollubbee
Sacred Song, “Hide Me”	School

Friday Morning, June 3, 1898

Sacred Song, “A Home on High”	School
“National Monument to Washington”	J. R. Culberson
“How Mrs. Smart Learned to Skate.....	E. P. Sloan
School “The Midshipmate”	Adams
“A Tribute to the Honored Dead”	A. J. Bobb
“Rhyme for Hard Times”	Jefferson Hicks
Vocal Duet	
“How to Get a Start”	Abel Belvin
Sacred Song, “When the Mists have rolled Away”.....	School
Valedictory	J. B. Spring
Address	W. W. Appleton
Song, “Lord’s Prayer”	School

After the Atoka Agreement, to which Mrs. McCurtain was a party, she spent the remainder of her life at Tuskahoma. She was interested in the education of her people, both boys and girls. The Tuskahoma Academy was only a short distance from her home. She was always in close touch with the work there. It was a great privilege and so considered by the girls in that school, to be invited to spend a week-end at her home. Her slogan was “educate the boys and girls for leadership. The time is fast coming when we shall need them.”

Jane McCurtain was a true pioneer. She was a pioneer in a new country, a pioneer in a civilization foreign to her people, and she was, along with her white sister, pioneering in education and politics. The few old council members living today all speak with pride when they speak of her, and none fails to mention her intellect and her leadership.

After Statehood and after the council house was no longer used as a gathering place for the law makers, Mrs. McCurtain, or as she was later called "Aunt Jane," was made custodian of the building. This position she held until her death in 1924.

One of her old friends who had known her many years made this comment: "She retained her enthusiasm to the end and like the far famed Sarah Bernhart she held her place in the limelight of her people even in death."

One of Mrs. McCurtain's daughters, Lizzie Dunlap, still lives near Tuskahoma, and from her much of this information was obtained. There were five children. Lizzie Dunlap, now Mrs. W. Akerman, was the youngest. The other children are dead. Elza, the eldest daughter, never married. She lived with her mother. Lucinda Frances was Mrs. Charles Herd of Antlers. Ida Norah was Mrs. Lyman Moore of Spiro. There was a son who died in early manhood.

Mrs. McCurtain probably had the widest acquaintance of any one of her tribe. She was known and respected from one side of the Choctaw Nation to the other. To some she was Miss Jane, others Mrs. McCurtain, and in the later period of her life Aunt Jane. She knew personally every chief of the Choctaws from 1860 on until her death in 1924, and the most of them she entertained when they came to Council. She was the wife of a chief, a sister-in-law to two chiefs, and a niece of another. She knew Choctaw history and politics.

Her religion was shown mostly in her charity. She was charitable to the extreme. She was a hard worker, and for those about her she advocated work. Her home was open to those who needed aid.

Jane McCurtain was a great woman, and she holds a most important place in the history of the Choctaws.



JANE McCURTAIN



HOME OF MRS. JANE McCURTAIN
TUSKAHOMA, OKLAHOMA
Taken in 1907. The last Council.