

## CENTENNIAL OF THE NEW TOWN METHODIST CHURCH

*By Muriel H. Wright*

One of the early church organizations in the Indian Territory, the New Town Methodist Church located in the country about a mile northwest of Okmulgee, celebrated its centennial in September, 1949. This centennial was long overdue, one which the Indian congregation of the little white frame church with its steeple and bell had long intended to celebrate, for the first membership was organized in the Creek Nation 109 years ago.

Every mission church in this country was planted by some consecrated Christian character, the light of whose personality shines the brighter as his work endures through the years. The one who organized the New Town Church was the Reverend Samuel Checote.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1819 in the Chattahoochee Valley, Alabama, he was of the Hitchiti speaking people of the white or peace town of Sawokli, his family belonging to the McIntosh Party of the Lower Creek Division in the old nation east. As a lad of eight years, he attended the Asbury Manual Labor School operated by the Methodist Church at Fort Mitchell, Alabama. He came to the Indian Territory in 1829, his people first locating north of the Arkansas River, near present Muskogee, but later settling farther west in the Creek Nation, in the region of Okmulgee.

Checote's attendance at Asbury School in Alabama brought him under the influence of the Methodist Mission work in Northeastern Indian Territory where the Reverend John Harrell of the Missouri Conference held evangelistic camp meetings as early as 1831. John Harrell was transferred to the Arkansas Conference in 1836, to hold meetings and establish churches on both sides of the Arkansas state line, which was the beginning of his life's work among the Indians. During the years 1835 to 1844, all work of Christian churches was in eclipse in the Creek Nation, West. The Creek laws forbade Christian religious services, the bitter feeling against all churches and missions having arisen out of the troubles and difficulties experienced by the Creek people in their old homeland east of the Mississippi River before their removal to the Indian Territory.

In 1841, when the New Town Church was organized, Samuel Checote as a Methodist lay worker called and held the meeting secretly for anyone caught preaching the Christian religion was subject to penalty of a flogging of fifty lashes, under the law of the Creek

<sup>1</sup> For brief biographies of Samuel Checote, see O. A. Lambert, "Historical Sketch of Col. Samuel Checote, Once Chief of the Creek Nation," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (September, 1926), pp. 275-80; and John Bartlett Meserve, "Chief Samuel Checote, with sketches of Chiefs Locher Harjo and Ward Coachman," *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 4 (December, 1938), pp. 401-09.

Council. Tradition has it that the year before he had been caught twice holding Christian services in a river bottom canebrake, and had been severely whipped both times by Creek officers. Christianity spread and was soon accepted by many of the Creek people, otherwise Checote would have been executed if caught preaching a third time. In 1844, Samuel Checote pleaded his cause before Chief Roly McIntosh, and the law that made it a crime to preach the Christian religion was abolished by order of the Creek chiefs and the National Council.

Checote's service as a Methodist pastor began when he was admitted from the Creek District to the Indian Mission Conference in session at Clear Springs Camp Ground, Cherokee Nation, October 28, 1852, and continued to his death in 1884, except during his service in the Confederate States Army as Lieutenant Colonel of the First Regiment of Creek Mounted Volunteers, and during his three terms as Principal Chief of the Creek Nation. In 1869, he was made a presiding elder in the Indian Mission Conference, and in 1882, was selected by the Methodist Episcopal Church South as delegate to the Ecumenical Conference in London, England. His absorbing interest throughout his life time was promotion of the Christian religion. As Principal Chief, gifted with high executive ability, Samuel Checote furthered and preached education, agriculture, and Christianity for the advancement of the Creek people and a more perfect system of their national government.

High tribute was paid this great Creek leader in the history of Oklahoma during the celebration in 1949, at the New Town Church which he had founded as a young man. His son, Martin Checote, had followed him in the Methodist ministry; and, also, his grandson, the Reverend Sam Checote, who is living at the the age of eighty-three, one of the most beloved citizens in the Okmulgee vicinity. It was during his pastorate at New Town Church, about 1901, that he and members of the congregation erected the present church building there, the original building of logs having been recently destroyed by fire.

For the Reverend Sam Checote, the Centennial at New Town Church was the crowning glory in remembrance of the Christian lives of his forefathers and of the Creek people who were counted in the congregation of the church during more than a century. He was present for the three-day celebration, during which he was greeted by throngs of visitors from over the country, among whom were members of other church denominations, white people and Indians—Creeks, Choctaws, Seminoles, Sac and Fox, and others. After the regular morning and afternoon programs, they visited to reminisce and renew old acquaintance and friendship. At noon, real feasts were served in the camp houses over the grounds, the tables loaded with food including some of the old time Indian dishes such as "sofky" (boiled hominy) fresh from the camp fires.

The Centennial had the active interest and support of the Creek Indian Memorial Association of Okmulgee, through its President. Mr. James M. Noble, its Secretary, Mrs. Jean Risor, and members of its Board. It was largely through their efforts that funds were raised and plans promoted to assist the 120 members of the New Town Church in the celebration. Its success, however, fully justified the weeks of preliminary planning and of work contributed to this outstanding event in Oklahoma.

The high light of the Centennial centered in the program given at the church on the afternoon of the last day of the celebration, Sunday, September 25. It was then that this century old Indian Church was recognized by high dignitaries of the Methodist Church and other leaders from over Oklahoma who gathered to pay it tribute. Those who appeared on the afternoon's program were Bishop W. Angie Smith of the Oklahoma-New Mexico Area, Methodist Church, which includes the Oklahoma Indian Mission Conference; Reverend D. D. Etchieson, Superintendent, Reverend Tony Hill, District Superintendent, and Reverend W. U. Witt, retired Superintendent, all of the Indian Mission Conference; Reverend W. W. Mansfield, Okmulgee Methodist Church; Lieutenant Governor James E. Berry, of the State of Oklahoma; Major W. T. Wheatley, Oklahoma City Air Material Area, Tinker Air Force Base; W. O. Roberts, Superintendent, Five Civilized Tribes Agency, Muskogee; and Miss Muriel H. Wright, Editorial Department, Oklahoma Historical Society. Also, appearing on the program, were the Reverend George Long, present pastor of the New Town Church, who reviewed its place in the history of Methodism in Oklahoma, and the Reverend Sam Checote, retired pastor, who gave his reminiscences, both addresses personally interesting to the members of the congregation and the throng of visitors that crowded the sanctuary for this memorable occasion. Every address was followed with the singing of old time hymns in the Creek language, by the many excellent native voices in the congregation. The whole program was recorded on a special recording machine for preservation by the Creek Indian Memorial Association, as a part of its archival material in the Museum of the old Creek capitol at Okmulgee.

In his fine address, specially prepared for the Centennial, Lieutenant Governor Berry paid tribute in this epigrammatic statement: "New Town Methodist Church was a pioneer in Oklahoma cultural life."

Another speaker pointed out that the history of New Town Church is living history. The organization overcame great tribulation in its beginnings and has endured for more than a century nurturing the spirit of loyalty to Christian ideals and democratic traditions. The Centennial celebration brought in review the forces and the personalities that have made this locality worthy of remembrance in our state. Thousands of such localities in America, each with its living history, are what make our country great today.