

SKULLYVILLE AND ITS PEOPLE IN 1889

By G. E. Hartshorne, M.D.*

On May 26, 1889, fresh out of the Medical College of the University of Maryland, I hung out my shingle as "Physician and Surgeon" in a small Indian Territory village. The post office was Oak Lodge; but the community was known far and wide as Skullyville, a name coined from *iskulli*, Choctaw word for "money," and *ville*, French word for "town." It was here the Choctaws came to receive their payments from the United States Government soon after their migration to the West (1831-34).

Skullyville was located in the county of the same name, with the Arkansas River its northern boundary and the State of Arkansas its eastern boundary, joining two other Choctaw counties on the south and west. This area is now situated in the north end of LeFlore County, Oklahoma. The village was on the old Fort Smith and Fort Towson road, fifteen miles southwest of Fort Smith.

It was the first seat of the Government's location of an agency for the Choctaws in 1832, during the removal from their old homes in Mississippi and Alabama.¹ The first agency building stood until September 23, 1947, when it was accidentally destroyed by fire. It was originally three large hewn oak rooms with a gallery, or hallway, between the south and middle rooms, and a great stack rock chimney between the middle and north rooms. There was also a fireplace in the south room, with its rock chimney. The front entrance was a flight of seven steps leading to the gallery; another set of steps on the north led to the end of the long porch which shaded the entire front of the building.

* George Ewing Hartshorne, M.D., a native of Iowa, graduated from the Medical School of the University of Maryland April 18, 1893; completed a special course in the Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat College of Chicago in 1900, and attended clinics in the University of Austria at Vienna, Austria, in 1913. He first came to the Indian Territory in 1869 when his family resided for a time in the Cherokee Nation, in what is now Nowata County. After his marriage to Miss David Cornelia McCurtain, daughter of David Cornelius and Rebecca (Krebs) McCurtain, he made his home and practiced at Spiro until he located in McAlester in 1901. After World War I, during which he served as an eye specialist, he moved to Tulsa where he has continued his profession.—Ed.

¹ This post office was first established as Choctaw Agency on June 26, 1833, Francis W. Armstrong, Postmaster. Name changed to Scullyville on August 16, 1860, Francis E. Williams, Postmaster. The spelling "Scullyville" rather than "Skullyville" appeared on Post Office Department records. Name of post office changed to Oak Lodge on December 22, 1871, Henry W. Fannin, Postmaster.—George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma." *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (Summer, 1948), pp. 194, 219.—Ed.

Fifty yards to the northeast was a large, ever-flowing spring which was a deciding factor in the location of the agency. The spring is a boon to travelers to this day. Other factors were the presence of two other springs within a mile, the nearness of the Fort Smith-Fort Towson road, and of the Arkansas River only three miles distant, where a landing stage might be located.

In 1892, Thomas D. Ainsworth was making his home in the agency building when he discovered that leakage in the north room roof had rotted several of the logs there. He had this room, with its stack chimney, razed, and the outer walls of the other two rooms weather-boarded. New roofing, flooring and ceiling was added, and a new frame room built back of the south room, the gallery extended to run full length. Every stick of lumber and every red cedar shingle that went into the building was hand sawn and every nail hand wrought on the grounds.

One mile east of the agency was New Hope Seminary, a boarding school accommodating one hundred Choctaw girls, established in 1842 by the Choctaw Council and placed under the management of the Methodist Church. Seven miles north, Fort Coffee Academy was also established for Choctaw boys in the same year.²

A hundred yards from the Agency site is a cemetery wherein still stands a large sandstone monument with the date, 1832, engraved upon it. In this quiet, shaded retreat lie the remains of most of the Choctaws who have died in the vicinity since that early day. Here lie many of their slaves, too. And later on white people, renters and transients, laid their loved ones to rest here. Three of the five McCurtain brothers, members of a prominent Choctaw family, are buried in Old Skullyville Cemetery.

Mail came to Skullyville daily by hack, about eleven o'clock in the morning when the rivers were not too high, and returned about one o'clock in the afternoon. The post office then forwarded pouches of mail twice a week by horseback on two Star routes, to the west.

All merchandise, cotton and other produce was hauled overland to and from Fort Smith by ox and mule teams, at the time I moved to Skullyville, as river traffic had all but ceased some years before. Later, in 1895, the K. C. P. & G. (now Kansas City Southern) railroad from Kansas City to Port Arthur, Texas, relieved the strain and drew merchants to its station two miles west, at Spiro.

In 1889, all but a dozen of the people of Skullyville were Indian. There were about eighty-five men, women and children living within a half-mile circumference.

² Fort Coffee Academy for boys was established by the Choctaw Council in 1842, and placed under the supervision of Methodist missionary teachers. The school was housed in the abandoned buildings of old Fort Coffee which had been the principal U. S. military post on the Arkansas River from the time of the abandonment of Fort Smith in 1834 to its re-establishment in 1838.—Ed.

Thomas D. Ainsworth conducted a large general store with the aid of his brothers, J. B. and J. T. Ainsworth. His cotton gin and corn mill were operated by Ed Baker, a white man. Ainsworth had, besides, large land holdings. Garrett Ainsworth (a cousin of T. D.) and his father, "Uncle" Spence Ainsworth, ran another large merchandising establishment, and had river bottom farms. E. W. Fannin, brother-in-law to the Ainsworths (T. D., J. B. and J. T.) operated a general store together with his bachelor brother John. He also dealt in livestock and owned bottom farmland.

Isom Watkins owned farms, dealt in cattle and ran a small store. He had, besides, a gin and a corn mill, operated for him by a Mr. Ellis. There were three blacksmith shops: one owned by J. P. Earp and Providence Chapman, one by Louis Hamby, Mr. Ellis' son-in-law, and one by "Old Man" Triplet.

Dr. Riley Foyil was the only physician there prior to my arrival. He also held the office of Oak Lodge postmaster, with Miss Lulu Donaldson as his assistant.

J. F. Tibbitts, an early white settler, had a general store. John Quinn, a retired gentleman from Ireland, lived on the main street with his Choctaw wife.

Near the cluster of stores lived Mrs. W. W. Ish and her family, Ed Bowman and his grandmother, Mrs. Blair, Mrs. Landers (Dr. Foyil's widowed sister) and her son, Mrs. A. W. Donaldson and her family, and the J. F. Tibbitts. At the edge of the ring, on the big road leading west, lived W. G. Kayser and family; he was a cattleman and landowner. On the east side of the village, on a road leading to the Poteau River, lived Mrs. M. A. Bower and family; Dr. Foyil and family, including his bachelor brother-in-law, Jim Stone; the W. W. Watkins family and the Robert Ward family.

Removed as we were from large cities and Eastern civilization, it may be thought we lived a dull life with nothing to break the routine of sowing, planting, trading and housekeeping. There was, however, lively social activity which, of course, often took in visitors from neighboring communities; and which always included the teachers at New Hope, since there was a dearth of unmarried young ladies in Skullyville.

Nearly every family employed Negro domestic servants, leaving the mistress of the house with some free time for recreation. There were card games, and dances a good many evenings. There were picnics, fish fries, horseback jaunts and "fortnightlies." Singers and lecturers of note and traveling stage troupes, as well as fairs and circuses, drew us often to Fort Smith.

Godey's Ladies Book was not unheard of in our community; and our young maids and matrons sashayed about beautifully and stylishly

attired in the latest Parisian fashions. If they were not, themselves, adept at the needle, Fort Smith boasted dressmakers of skill and flair, as many a yellowed photograph will attest.

As a doctor, I find it interesting to remember that the general stores, in addition to carrying everything needed for farming and stock raising, also sold drugs—some of them deadly—over the counter, to anyone. They stocked quinine and calomel, of course, for combating the prevalent malaria, and paregoric for the ubiquitous “tummy ache.” But strychnine could be bought also, and arsenic, laudanum, and morphine! It is refreshing to remember that these were used for legitimate purposes.

Nothing much remains of Skullyville now. All the stores, gins and blacksmith shops were torn down years ago, as were several of the homes; but some of the latter are still occupied by descendants of the original owners.

New Hope Seminary was destroyed by fire the last night of 1896. Where stood Fannin's store and the post office, the U. S. Highway now crosses almost at a right angle on the old wagon road. Strangers in cars and busses, speeding through, would never guess that the little gravel hill between two small creeks had been the business site of one of the Indian Territory's richest and most aristocratic communities.³

But Skullyville is still a very real place in the memory of the few old timers left, and their descendants. Most of those who were heads of families when I went there have long since passed away. I can think of only one now living, Mrs. Ed Bowman, née Gertrude Moore, now living in Spiro.

Of the “younger set,” many have moved away. Most of those who remained in the vicinity, live now in Spiro, a few miles from their old homesteads. Of those, I may mention a Thomas D. Ainsworth's daughter, Jessie, who married Mrs. Ish's son, Edgar Moore, and daughter; Ella, who married Frank Tibbitts, Junior; Pauline Fannin Hickman, daughter of E. W. Fannin; Henry Fannin's widow, Florence; and Lena Moore, youngest daughter of Mrs. Ish, who married R. V. Smith, a newcomer to Spiro, all living in Spiro now.

³ The Committee on Marking Historical Sites in the state, representing the Oklahoma Historical Society in co-operation with the State Highway Commission has erected two historical markers indicating the sites of the Choctaw Agency and old Fort Coffee, on U. S. Highway No. 271 about a mile east of the present town of Spiro, in Le Flore County.—Ed.