

TWO HISTORIC INDIAN BURIALS FROM PITTSBURG COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

By Charles Bareis*

Early in January of 1951, Mr. W. O. Moody discovered and excavated two historic Indian burials on his farm which is located on Gaines Creek four miles east of Canadian, Oklahoma, in Pittsburg County.¹ The two burials were found while cultivating a field in the northwest section of Mr. Moody's farm and were located only a short distance from Gaines Creek.² The presence of flint chips, arrowheads, wattle and pottery sherds suggests a village site. This site has been designated as Ps-28 in the University archaeological survey. The discovery was subsequently investigated by Dr. Frank A. DeLaMater of McAlester who reported it to Dr. Robert Bell of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. Dr. Bell obtained the skeletons and associated material for laboratory analysis and reconstruction. Both Mr. Moody and Dr. DeLaMater are to be commended for preserving this material.

Although both burials were apparently in a flexed position, Burial No. 2 had the additional characteristic of having both arms extended outward away from the body. The burials were reported as being found ten to twelve inches beneath the surface in small graves about two feet by three feet. Burial No. 1 was orientated in a north-south direction with the skull directed south and facing west. Burial No. 2, located approximately seventy feet south of Burial No. 1, was orientated in the same manner, but the skull faced east. An ash

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¹ This area in present Pittsburg County is within the boundaries of the former Choctaw Nation organized under written constitution adopted by the Choctaw Council in 1834. From the organization of counties in the Choctaw Nation in 1850 to Oklahoma statehood in 1907, the region was in Gaines County, Mosholotubbee District, Choctaw Nation. The Chickasaw purchased the right of settlement among the Choctaw, in 1837. From this date to 1855 when the Chickasaw located and organized their own government as a nation farther west in present Oklahoma, Gaines Creek was a part of the eastern boundary of the Chickasaw District, Choctaw Nation.—Ed.

² "This site was recorded by an archeological survey made of the Gaines Creek area in the summer of 1950 by Mr. Leonard Johnson. It is located on the east side of Gaines Creek in the northwest quarter of Section 3, Township 8 North, Range 16 East. At the time of the survey, Mr. Johnson labeled the site as Creek with a question mark, thus indicating the uncertainty of identification."—Letter from Dr. Robert E. Bell, Chairman, Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma, dated October 18, 1951, addressed to Muriel Wright, Oklahoma Historical Society, in reply to an inquiry with reference to the location of this Indian burial site in Pittsburg County.

lense near the skull suggests that a fire had been burned at the grave. Apparently the burials were in an excellent state of preservation when they were first exposed by Mr. Moody, but, due to an overnight freeze, considerable breakage resulted, which necessitated laboratory restoration before a determination of age and sex could be made. Cultural materials were associated with both burials.

BURIAL No. 1

A preliminary investigation revealed an incomplete skelton. The bones of Burial No. 1 responded well to cleaning except for areas in the pelvis, the sacrum, and left clavicle. Rodent action or gnawing marks were observed on the shaft of the right ulna. For a general statement on condition of the bones, it may be said that practically all of the bones revealed erosion at points of articulation. A more thorough analysis of the bones after cleaning and restoration revealed that some were incomplete and others missing.

Since many of the bones of this skeleton were missing, and because many of the bones which were present still contained damaged areas, even after restoration the aging and sexing of this burial proved to be relatively difficult.

In attempting to age this burial, several characteristics of both the skull and long bones were evident. In the skull, the sagittal, coronal, and lambdoidal sutures all were beginning to close, indicating an age of at least twenty-six years. Even though a considerable section of the two nasal bones was missing, the area which was present revealed that the two nasal bones were beginning to close. The third molar teeth had erupted, which would correlate with the above named sutures of the skull with respect to age. On the long bones, all of the epiphyses were closed, which would indicate a minimum age of at least twenty-one years. The pelvis, although quite incomplete, indicated an age of about twenty years. Considering all of these areas, and making allowances with respect to the erosion on the long bones, an age of twenty-six to twenty-eight years has been assigned to this skeleton.

In attempting to determine the sex of this burial, the difficulties increase because at many points where outstanding sexual characteristics usually occur in skeletons, we find that Burial No. 1 reveals either a broken or missing bone or an eroded surface. Also, there are only a few characteristics which are definite enough to classify. I would classify this skeleton as a delicate male, based on the following characteristics: The obturator foramen is a triangular oval on both sides of the pelvis. The pelvic opening appears heart-shaped. The sub-pubic angle appears narrow, even though it is damaged in the pubic area. The ischial spines are bent inward toward the midline. The mastoids are long and moderately large. The long bones are large, rather rugged, and have a tendency to appear flat rather than rounded.

Of the six cultural items found in association with Burial No. 1 none can be dated exactly. A china saucer which required no reconstruction was present. It is designed with flowers around the rim, and a weakly discernible potter's mark could be identified. A matching china cup, broken in excavation, was also recovered. The cup was void of any discernible potter's mark. However, it is possible to note that the cup is of the handleless variety. Additional material recovered included a broken tablespoon minus the handle, an iron pipe tomahawk head, a broken piece of tin, and an old style wine bottle. The broken spoon, iron pipe tomahawk, and small piece of tin were all deeply corroded and covered with rust. The old style wine bottle was in excellent condition. However, the bottom appeared to be scratched and abraded from use to such an extent that the bottle would not stand perfectly flush upon a flat surface. The remains of a woven fabric is still adhering to the flat blade of the iron hatchet.

BURIAL No. 2

A preliminary investigation of this burial revealed that it also was incomplete and was damaged to a greater extent than Burial No. 1. Some animal bones were also mixed in with Burial No. 2, and some teeth present may be those of a deer. Most of the animal bones were badly broken and damaged. The skeletal material responded well to cleaning but also revealed the characteristic erosion at all points of articulation on the long bones; however, erosion was not strictly limited to the long bones. The pelvis in particular was badly damaged. The right ilium was broken in four separate sections, and even reconstruction did not restore it anywhere close to the original form. As in Burial No. 1, some bones were incomplete and others were missing.

Because of considerable damage to this skeleton, especially in the pelvic area, sexing and aging again presented a difficulty. The sutures of the skull all appeared to be open, indicating an age no older than twenty-two. No third molar teeth were present. On the long bones, all of the epiphyses appeared to be fused except on the right and left femurs. At the proximal ends of these two bones, faint traces of the epiphysis could be detected. This would indicate an age of about seventeen. On the pelvis, breakage has obscured a thorough analysis, but the epiphyses here are also closed, which would indicate an age of about eighteen or nineteen. Taking the previous data into account, an age of seventeen to nineteen has been assigned for Burial No. 2.

Determination of sex on Burial No. 2 had to be attempted without the advantage of a complete pelvis. In the skull, the eye orbits were not characteristically sharp, a trait which may be found in female skulls. However, a U-shaped palate was present, and the mastoids were moderately large, revealing a male feature. On the long bones, areas for muscle attachment were rather pronounced.

They appeared large and relatively flat, rather than rounded in cross section. The sacrum was rather long but did not curve inward abruptly. Even with these male characteristics, the skeleton still presented a female appearance in some characteristics. For example, weak nuchal lines were present on the occipital bone in the skull, and theinion was weakly developed. In the pelvis, the greater sciatic notch appeared more obtuse than narrow. Considering the total number of characteristics, Burial No. 2 has also been classified as a delicate male.

The cultural material in association with Burial No. 2 was more varied than the material associated with Burial No. 1. Twenty broken pottery fragments were recovered, and they are characteristic of the type of pottery made by the Creek Indians in the historic period. This pottery ware has been designated as McIntosh Roughened by David J. Wenner and examples have been illustrated in the literature by Schmitt and Quimby.³ One tin cup was present and was rusted over its entire surface. Five pieces of iron of varying shapes were present. Two bone-handled table knives were present, and the blades of the knives were deeply corroded. Additional material included two pieces of burned bone, two broken pieces of glass, one small piece of charcoal, five small pieces of clay wattle, a small broken section from the base of a cup, bowl fragment of a small clay pipe, and eleven small pieces of broken chinaware. One piece of broken china has been worked into a circular disc and reveals a characteristic potter's mark which can be traced to European origin. The remaining ten pieces of china were fragments of flat plates or saucers having a simple blue pattern around the rim.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

These two historic Indian burials add to our information concerning recent historical burial customs in Oklahoma. They are also of interest because both native-made pottery sherds and historic white trade materials occur in the same grave.

The circular piece of chinaware from Burial No. 2 and the saucer from Burial No. 1 contain a potter's mark which can be identified. The china was made by the Davenport company located at Longport, Stradfordshire, England. This company started manufacturing chinaware in 1793 and continued to make it until 1882.⁴ Since one potter's mark contains the figure 44, it is probable that the specimen in question was made in 1844.

The assignment of a date to the iron pipe tomahawk, bone handled table knives, tin cup and broken pieces of glass is impossible

³ Schmitt, Karl, "Two Creek Pottery Vessels from Oklahoma," *The Florida Anthropologist*, Vol. III, Nos. 1-2, May 1950, p. 4.

Quimby, G. I., and Alexander Spoehr, "Historic Creek Pottery from Oklahoma," *American Antiquity*, Vol. 15, 1950, pp. 249-251.

⁴ Honey, E. B., *Old English Porcelain*, 1946, pp. 248-280, McGraw-Hill Book Co., London.

except to suggest that a date in the latter half of the 19th century appears most reasonable. The old style wine bottle is certainly not of recent make, and the worn surfaces on the base suggest that it had been used for a great many years. The bottle contains no pontil mark which suggests it was made some time after 1850.

The data from these burials becomes more meaningful when compared with Swanton's ethnological data on Creek burial customs.⁵ For example, the Creeks are reported to have built a fire over the grave and tended it for four days after burial. The presence of ashes, pieces of burned bone, and charcoal with Burial No. 2, suggests the fire building practices mentioned by Swanton.

Another similarity to the ethnographical literature is revealed in the grave goods associations. Swanton cites Roman, who states that the dead were buried in a sitting position, and were furnished with a number of grave goods such as, a musket, powder and ball, a hatchet, pipe, a looking glass, etc.⁶ The cultural material in association with Burials No. 1 and 2 was equally as prevalent, and contained some of the items mentioned by Roman: namely, a tomahawk, and a section of a pipe. The sitting position mentioned by Roman, would be interpreted by anthropologists as referring to the flexed character of the burial.

In addition, it is known that when the Creeks buried their dead, coffee was put in a cup placed over the left shoulder. Burial No. 1 contained a china cup, and Burial No. 2 contained a tin cup, each of which may have been used to perform this practice. Even the wine bottle associated with Burial No. 1 may have some significance. Swanton quotes Hitchcock who says, "If a man dies from drunkenness, a bottle of whiskey is buried with him, as they say that, dying from liquor, he will want a dram when he awakes in the other world."⁷ The individual from Burial No. 1 may not have died from drunkenness, but this does not mean that he was adverse to taking a drink now and then.

Considering the nature of both burials, distance from the surface, position, and associated cultural material, it is reasonably certain that both individuals were buried at about the same time period. This would be between 1850-1890. A final statement by the author would conclude that, although the data is not decisive, it appears reasonable to assign the burials to the Creek Indians.⁸ This gives us basic evidence of Indian burial customs for the latter part of the 19th century.

⁵ Swanton, J. R., "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy," *Bureau of American Ethnology*, 42 Annual Report, 1924-25, pp. 388-398.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

⁸ Some notes on the history of the Gaines Creek region in Pittsburg County will be found in the *Appendix* at the end of this article, contributed by the Associate Editor (M.H.W.) at the request of Dr. Robert E. Bell, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma.

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APPENDIX

The anthropological report by Charles Bareis, on the apparently Creek Indian burial site calculated to have been made in the comparatively late period of Oklahoma Indian history, 1850 to 1890, within a part of the Choctaw Nation now included in Pittsburg County, raises some interesting questions on the history of the Indian tribal groups that were neighbors—Chickasaw and Creek—in the Gaines Creek region. The Canadian River two miles north of this recently discovered burial site was the boundary line between the Choctaw and the Creek nations, and any Creek settlement south of this boundary would have been a matter of approval by the Choctaw General Council. Up until 1855, the status of any Indian tribal group other than Choctaw within the Choctaw domain would have been recorded by law of the General Council. Acts can be cited whereby even the status or the rights of citizenship of certain Chickasaw families were established by the Choctaw Council before the Chickasaw established their own nation in 1855.

From 1838, Chickasaw settlements extended along Gaines Creek in the general region where the Indian burials are located (east of the City of Canadian) and on south to Brushy Creek and eastward along the main roads toward present Red Oak. A number of the prominent Chickasaw family of Colberts and their relatives lived in these settlements. It is known from the records of anthropology and of history that Chickasaw burial customs were nearly the same, if not identical, with those of the Creek in the late period of their history in the 19th Century. There was a very conservative, clannish Chickasaw group, many of them full bloods, who observed the old tribal customs late in the history of the tribe. Pitman Colbert, an outstanding leader among the Chickasaw after their removal to this country, advocated and upheld strict observance of the old tribal ways and customs, a far-reaching influence that held even in modern times. His granddaughter, a woman of fine character who was enlightened and modern in her ways, requested a short time before her death a few years ago that certain of her personal treasures be buried with her like "the old time Chickasaws."

Any Creek Indians that may have located on Gaines Creek in the Choctaw Nation after 1850 doubtless were closely associated with or related to the Chickasaw in this region. Some of the Colberts married in the Creek Nation where they were known as influential citizens after the period of the Civil War. Likewise, the McIntoshes and the McGillivrays prominent in the Creek Nation married among the Chickasaw before the removal to the Indian Territory. One of the four districts (politico-geographic) in the Chickasaw Nation back in Mississippi was called McGillivray's (or McGillbery's) District for its leader.

One John McGillbury of the Creek Nation was allowed citizenship, and thereby settlement in the Choctaw Nation, by a special act of the Choctaw

Council, approved October 11, 1849. (This family name is found spelled variously in different Indian tribal records: McGilbery, McGilberry, McGilbray, McGilbra, McGillvray, McGillivray). John McGilbury seems to have settled in the east central part of the Choctaw Nation, probably within the present limits of Latimer County. Some persons of this family name, registered on the Choctaw rolls, selected their land allotments before statehood a few miles south of Red Oak in Latimer County. It should be added that the Chickasaw and the Choctaw had the right to settle within either nation in selecting their lands in severalty. In general, enrolled Choctaw and Chickasaw selected their allotments near where they had lived, someone in a family allotting the old home place to keep the improvements there—houses, barns, fenced fields and pastures. Available records in the history of the Gaines Creek region do not show a Creek settlement there.

A recent check of allotment records and other related data has revealed that a number of the Indian citizens who selected their allotments of land in the Gaines Creek region in present Pittsburg County, within a radius from two to eight miles of the burial sites in question, were descendants of the Colberts, and one of these allottees, according to available records, was a grandson of Pitman Colbert. These burials might have been made by refugees from the Creek Nation that located temporarily near the Chickasaw on Gaines Creek as Confederate allies in the time of the Civil War, though most, if not all, Indian refugees from the nations to the north located far south in the Choctaw Nation, on Red River. It is logical and quite probable that these Indian burials were of individuals who were closely identified with the Chickasaw by inter-marriage, if not purely Chickasaw.

—Muriel H. Wright