

TEWAH HOKAY

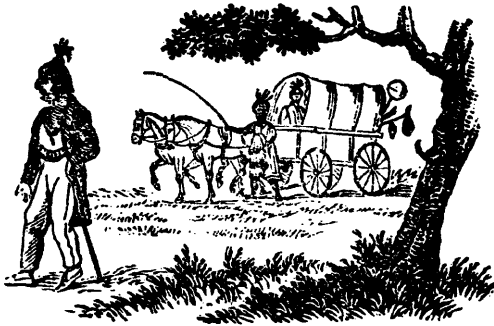
By Muriel H. Wright

A little book with quaint woodcut pictures under the title *The Choctaw Girl*, printed in Philadelphia in 1835, has been recently added to the Library of the Oklahoma Historical Society, giving a bit of history on the Choctaws at the time of their removal to the Indian Territory.¹ It tells the true story of Tewah Hokay who lived near Bethabara Mission on the Mountain Fork River in Southeastern Oklahoma. This was on the west side of the river close by the place where the noted, giant cypress tree has cast its shadows for some 2,000 years. The lofty branches of this ancient relic rising above the surrounding forest and marking the location of the Bethabara Crossing on the Mountain Fork were seen by the Choctaws as they were nearing the end of the Trail of Tears when they were moved to Oklahoma, in 1831-34.

Tewah Hokay was a little Choctaw girl who came with her parents on the tragic journey west, during which many of the Indians died or were made invalids from hardships and accidents along the way. Tewah Hokay herself received an injury from which she never recovered. The missionary and others from Bethabara Mission went to see her where she lived with her parents in a humble cabin home, for she was not able to go to the school taught by Miss Eunice Clough² in the new school-house nearby.

¹ Published by the American Sunday-school Union, 146 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa., 1835, writer not given. *The Choctaw Girl* was brought to the attention of the Oklahoma Historical Society by Lee F. Harkins who has many rare books and other materials on the history of the Choctaws and Chickasaw in his own private library in Tulsa.

² Eunice Clough, born in Bradford, New Hampshire, in 1803, began her work as a missionary under the auspices of the American Board, among the Choctaws in Mississippi, in January, 1830, serving as a teacher in Mayhew and Aikhunnah missions. She arrived at Bethabara Mission on October 27, 1832; she taught in the new school-house on the east side of the Mountain Fork where there was a large settlement of Choctaws, among whom were some prominent mixed-blood families including the Howells, Folsoms and Pitchlyns. This was Eagle Town proper where the Reverend Cyrus Byington made his home and established Stockbridge Mission in 1837, when Bethabara Mission was closed. Miss Clough transferred and began teaching at Lukfata about ten miles west of Bethabara, in 1835. Among her pupils was a Choctaw lad called "Kiliabote," whom she named Allen Wright, years later elected and served as Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation (1866-70). At old Boggy Depot, he wrote about Miss Clough, saying that she was a wonderful teacher who was greatly missed by her pupils at Lukfata when she left her school and married Mr. Noah Wall. She mothered Mr. Wall's lovely little daughter, Tryphena, by his late wife, Lucy (or Lucretia) Folsom Wall, the daughter of Nathaniel Folsom who died advanced in years and was buried at Eagle Town on the Mountain Fork. A granddaughter of Noah and Eunice (Clough) Wall married T. J. Hogg who was a Representative in the House from Roger Mills County, in the 14th and 15th State Legislatures in Oklahoma.



Choctaw family removing.

The great history of Choctaw missions sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Oklahoma had its beginnings in this state when Bethabara Mission was established in July, 1832, by the Reverend Loring S. Williams.³ He had come with the first parties of Choctaws who had set out for their new country in the West in 1831, during the Indian Removal from Mississippi, arriving on the Mountain Fork in the vicinity of the Old Eagle Town in March, 1832.⁴ He began searching for a location to build a home for his family but found and purchased instead a house in a good state of repair, with some improvements around it, owned by a white man who had lived in the community when this part of the country was in Arkansas Territory, but who had had to move recently after the boundary line between Arkansas and the Choctaw country had been surveyed. Mr. Williams soon erected a building for the mission near his own dwelling, and named both the mission

³Loring S. Williams was born in Pownal, Vermont, June 28, 1796. He departed from Salisbury, New York, for missionary work among the Cherokees, arriving at Brainerd Mission March 7, 1817. The following year he accompanied the Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury to Mississippi where he was associated in the establishment of Elliot Mission, the first mission of the American Board among the Choctaws, in June, 1818. He also founded and was stationed at the Choctaw missions of Bethel and Aiiikhunnah in Mississippi. He was ordained on March 27, 1830, and "visited the U. States, April 1—November 25, 1831." Mrs. Williams (formerly Matilda Loomis) taught in the mission school at Bethabara. Mr. Williams was very efficient in the Choctaw language; many of his religious tracts, Bible stories and hymns were published in the Choctaw language by the American Board, Boston, and by the Park Hill Mission Press, Park Hill, Indian Territory. He wrote several books for children, which were published at Park Hill. Many hymns composed by Mr. Williams are still found in the *Choctaw Hymnal*, bearing his initials "L. S. W.," and are reported by Choctaw scholars to be in excellent Choctaw. He retired from the mission work in 1838, and died in Iowa in the late 1880's.

⁴A post office was established at Eagle Town on July 1, 1834, with Loring S. Williams as postmaster. This was the first permanent town established in the Choctaw Nation West. The name of the post office was changed to "Eagletown" on December 16, 1892, with Jefferson Gardner as postmaster.—George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (Summer, 1948).



The missionary addressing the Choctaw girl.

One day the missionary of Bethabara asked her how she felt when she was lying in her shed alone, as she sometimes was. She answered in Choctaw, "When my father and my mother are out any where, I direct my prayers and my thoughts continually to my Father who is in heaven."

Missionary. Do you pray for others as well as yourself?

Child. I do; I pray for all my brothers, sisters, friends, and people.

Actual size of page and print from the book, *The Choctaw Girl*.

and the crossing on the Mountain Fork "Bethabara." Nothing remains of the mission at this historic site yet it is frequented today by many visitors who go there to see the old "Choctaw Governor's Mansion"⁵ on grounds up from the one-time crossing on the river and the "Big Cypress" which still stands as an ancient landmark in McCurtain County.

⁵This was the residence of the late Jefferson Gardner who was elected and served as Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation, 1894-1896. Nearby stood the court house for Eagle County, one of the nineteen counties organized in the Choctaw Nation in 1850, where county court was held by the Choctaw Indians until their government was closed when Oklahoma became a state.

The Choctaw Girl is a rare item for its human interest story and glimpse of life around the first mission on the Mountain Fork. Sixteen well worn pages in the little book prove that it has been read many times. On the yellowed page of the inside, front cover is the faded inscription in ink "Mount Pleasant—S.S. Library," showing that it was once in the library of some Sunday school, probably in Pennsylvania, where Tewah Hokay's story was read long ago, in part as follows:

THE CHOCTAW GIRL

"The tribe of Indians called Choctaws lived, until a few years ago, in the bounds of the state of Mississippi, in the southwestern part of the United States. Ministers were sent, in 1818, to preach the gospel to them, and to teach their children. They had several churches and schools for them, and many of the Indians had become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"But in the year 1831 this tribe began to move to another part of the country. Their new home was several hundred miles west of the river Mississippi. There they had to clear their fields, and build their huts; and in the course of two or three years, there were fifteen thousand of these Choctaws settled in their little villages.

"The missionary ministers and teachers went along with them; and again they built churches and opened schools, to instruct the Indians in the gospel.

"Among those who went first to the new settlement was an Indian and his wife, who had not long before become Christians. They took their children, several of whom were scholars in the missionaries' school. One of these was a little girl, whose name, in the Choctaw language, was TEWAH-HOKAY.⁶ She was then nine years old. While they were traveling to the west, this child had a fall, which injured her back. From that time she suffered very much, and was scarcely able to do anything, or even help herself. It must have been very painful to her to have to travel so far in this condition. But all the family arrived at the end of their journey, and took up their abode in a village which was called *Bethabara*, from the place in Judea where John the Baptist preached and baptized. Here a church was soon formed, which had one hundred and thirteen Indian communicants. There were also five Sunday-schools and five common schools in different parts of the Choctaw settlement.⁷

"But young Tewah-hokay was not able to go to school, and as her father and mother could not speak English, she could only use the Indian language. But the missionaries and her pious parents

⁶ The meaning of this Choctaw name in English refers to the little girl's broken back, from *sisa*, "burst open," and *oke*, "it is so," a final, positive statement.

⁷ The church at Bethabara was organized on October 19, 1832, with 56 members. The average number attending the preaching services of Mr. Williams was

could talk to her in Indian, and they taught her to love God, and believe in Jesus Christ. And this afflicted child was glad to hear of the Savior, and did not, like some children, refuse to become his disciple.

"She continued to grow worse, until, in 1834, her condition was very distressing. Her back was painful; she had large ulcers on her body, which produced a burning and wasting fever. Her parents were very poor, and could not give her the comforts which most children have when they are sick. During the day she used to be under a shed, near the house. Her only bedstead was some boards placed a few feet from the ground; and instead of a soft bed for her poor, sore body, she had nothing under her but one blanket. Another blanket covered her, and some rags, or a bundle of cotton, were her pillow Yet she did not complain, and she was willing to suffer all that her heavenly Father chose to appoint to her before he should take her to heaven. The missionaries and other Christian friends went to see her, and did what they could for her. And her father and mother nursed her as well as they were able.

"One day she said to her mother, 'Though I am afflicted with these sores, yet my Father above may pity me, as he did Lazarus. Oh that I might become as Lazarus! who, though he died in great distress, was saved in heaven.'

"It will be remembered that these were not her own words, for she could not speak English, but they are the sense of what she said in Choctaw.

"Her sufferings continued to increase during the summer, and her strength was fast wasting away The missionary knew that several religious persons had been to see her and pray with her, and thought that perhaps she might be flattered, as young persons often are, and led to think that they are remarkably good. He therefore asked her if she did not think she was a good child? She quickly answered, 'I do not think so.'

"Observing her looking very earnestly at her mother, he asked her if she loved her; to which she replied, 'I do indeed love my mother.' He then said, 'Which do you love best, your mother or the Lord Jesus Christ?' To this she at first said, 'I love Jesus better than I

150, the largest number, 500. The five schools by 1835 were: Bethabara (1832), Loring S. Williams, Missionary; Wheelock (1832), Alfred Wright, Missionary (18 miles east of Fort Towson); Clear Creek (1833), Ebenezer Hotchkin, Missionary (about 8 miles west of Wheelock); Bok Tuklo (1834), Henry R. Wilson, Missionary (about 7 miles southeast of Wheelock); Bethel (1834), Samuel Moulton, Missionary (about 5 miles southwest of Wheelock). Some 2,000 Choctaws had settled in country around Wheelock, calling for the additional schools there. The Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury arrived at Pine Ridge Mission in 1836, having selected the site about 2 miles from Doaksville in 1835. The Rev. Alfred Wright (native of New England) was the leader and head of the Choctaw missions, West, under the auspices of the American Board, with their organization beginning in 1832.



Choctaw girl addressing her brothers.

love my mother:' then added, as if she feared she would be understood to say she did not love her mother, 'My love to my mother is not so strong as it is to Jesus.' He then asked her mother if she thought this was right. 'Yes,' said the pious woman, with a smile of pleasure, 'I am glad to hear her say so. I think no one taught her this but Jesus. I rejoice that she loves Jesus more than me.' "

"A few days before her death she was removed to a new hut in the woods. She was then very weak, and not able to speak much. But before leaving the old place, she addressed her brothers, who were to remain there, in this manner. 'My brothers, I go before you, while you remain in this world. O my beloved brothers, this is the day of my parting from you! O that my brothers and sisters, while they remain in this world, would trust in God alone, so that we should meet with joy in another day! Should I stay at this house, you would see me when I die; but as I am going to another house to die, you may not see me. However, do not mourn and afflict yourselves. My beloved brothers, follow me!'

"In this state of mind she continued until the last day of July, 1834, when she ceased to breathe. She was then twelve years old. Just before she died she said to her parents, 'My father, my mother, do you still continue to love one another. This is the day of our separation. Thus I die; soon I shall see you no more. But do not grieve and mourn. I think I shall surely reach that blissful place above. It is said, although the poor man lay at the gate, (meaning Lazarus), yet his heavenly Father had compassion on him. O that he would pity me!'

"Who of the readers of this little history has not more blessings in this world than this Choctaw girl? And who of them is as contented as she was?"