

THE DELAWARE BIG HOUSE

*By H. L. McCracken**

PREFACE

At the time of white settlement on the East Coast, the Lenape or Delaware Indians formed the most important confederacy of the Algonquin-speaking tribe. They occupied a large area in Delaware, Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and southern New York. Their great chief, Tamenend, from whom the Tammany Society takes its name, made the first Delaware Treaty with William Penn in 1682.

In the 1700's the Delawares started their movement westward because of encroachment of the advancing whites, with the hope of preserving their way of life. By 1751 they had formed settlements in eastern Ohio where they remained until forced into Indiana in about 1770. In 1789 they moved to Missouri and later to Arkansas. By the year 1835 most of the tribe had been gathered on a reservation on the Kaw River in Kansas; they migrated in 1867 to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The great majority of the remaining members of the tribe are now in Oklahoma, mainly in Washington, Nowata, and Craig counties.

Throughout all the recorded history of the Delawares, great emphasis is placed upon their religion and particularly their annual ceremony in the "Big House" where they gathered for revival of their spiritual life and to pay homage to a higher being.

It has been said that the Delaware Big House ceremony, of all the Indian beliefs, was the nearest approach to christianity. It stressed humility of spirit and conduct, dependence upon the benevolence of spirit forces and gratitude for blessings they bestow, supplication for the continuance of blessings, the exemplariness of "clean", sincere behavior toward man and spirit, altruism, consideration for the aged and the afflicted, the injunction against violence and war, the value of concentrated spiritual unity in worship, the assumed dignity and barbaric grandeur of rites. In particular, the Big House ceremony endeavored to insure and promote human health and welfare, regardless of tribe or race.

The Delawares' unfailing belief and faith in a higher spiritual force and their continued devotion, culminating in the annual Big House ceremony, no doubt sustained them throughout their many

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years of suffering and hardship in their forced moves westward. In their last move, which was to Indian Territory, one of their first tribal acts was to erect a place of worship, the Big House.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BIG HOUSE AND THE CEREMONIAL

Twenty-nine years have passed since that last October the Delaware Indians gathered for their religious ceremonies at the Big House near the Caney River, west of Copan, Washington County, Oklahoma. The building, which was used only for the annual twelve-day meeting, fell into ruins in the late 1920's and early thirties. No evidence of it remains today. The old logs decomposed and were burned by present owner of the land, Ardell Large, several years ago. The carvings were saved and a small piece of the center post has been retained.

Most of the elder Indians who understood the mysteries and rules of the ritual are gone. Their children and grandchildren became so involved, so well integrated in the ways of modern living, that all that remains of the Big House are many memories and a few relics. Even the memories sometimes prove illusive for those who crowd memory's door grow older every hour. Yet, the things held in memory's grasp are changeless. A memory from childhood remains a child's impression. An adult's memory of the same incident is from a mature point of view. Not many events of Delaware history have been recorded but have been passed orally from generation to generation.¹

The Big House was constructed of rough logs in stockade fashion, "Ten logs high" in one description (John Falleaf's). The original roof was of bark. In 1913 the building was remodeled and handsplit shingles were used.^{1a} There are varying reports on exact

¹The late Frank G. Speck, of the University of Pennsylvania, made a study of the Delaware Indian ceremonies published in two volumes: *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony* (Pennsylvania Historical Commission, Harrisburg, 1931); and *Oklahoma Delaware Ceremonies, Feasts and Dances* (The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1937). These books are available to researchers in the Oklahoma Historical Society. M. R. Harrington, now of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, California, is the author of *Lenape Religion and Ceremonies* (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, 1921). A history of the Delaware tribe with the Big House receiving mention is in *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* by Muriel H. Wright (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1951).

^{1a}The Delaware Big House stood about six miles east of Lawrence, Kansas, during the reservation days in that state (1830-67). Soon after the Delawares purchased land among the Cherokees and settled in what is now Oklahoma, they erected the Big House on the Little Caney River. At the time of allotment of lands in severalty (1904), the Dawes Commission set aside an acre several hundred yards from the original site, and the building was moved to this location. The 1913 repairs were made on the old building at this site. A sectional map of this location sent to the Editorial Department through the kind interest of Mr. Paul Endacott, of Bartlesville, shows the site about 300 feet southwest of the center of Sec. 18, T. 18 N., R. 12 E. in Washington County, Oklahoma. This is on the west side of Little Caney River, about two miles northwest of Copan, north of Dewey—Ed.

size of the structure. One source reports the building as being 40 feet long, running east and west, and 24½ feet wide. Another says it was 27 feet by 52 feet. At the eaves the building was about six feet high; at the ridgepole about 14 feet high.

There were doors at both the east and west ends of the building. The west door was used only when the sacred fire was carried from the building. Two large chimney holes in the roof were the only other openings.

Large carvings of the human face were the only decorative features of the ceremonial building. On the huge central post which supported the ridgepole one face was turned to the east, the other to the west. One half of each face was painted red and the other black. Smaller faces adorned the six posts supporting the walls of the house and the four door posts. One of the original large carved faces is now on display in Woolaroc Museum, Bartlesville.²

The faces represented the great spirit and were not worshiped themselves. Pat Patterson, director of the Woolaroc Museum, quotes a Delaware as saying, "You have the figure there in sight, but the unseen spirit is back of it."

Mrs. C. O. Davis, Dewey, attended Big House ceremonies with her grandparents when she was a little girl. Her father, Sam Anderson, was a singer for the ceremony. Children did not take part in the ceremonies but were allowed to go in the House if they kept absolutely quiet. "I remember walking into the Big House", mused Mrs. Davis. "The faces seemed to be looking right at me from a great height. My grandmother explained that they stood for the one great spirit who sees all. When praying, we did not bow our heads but looked up to the great spirit."

Some authorities on Indian history theorize that the red right side of the face symbolized living beings and the black left side the dead. However, Freddie Washington, Copan, one of the appointed attendants at the last Big House meeting in 1927 says that the red side stood for good and the black side for strength.³ Mr. Washington's father, the late Joe Washington, was a priest of the traditional Delaware rites in Oklahoma. Frank Wilson led the last ceremony in 1927.

John Falleaf of Caney, Kansas, has mentioned a Delaware belief which might follow along with the idea that the black (left) side of the carved face symbolized strength. He said if a man was left-

² Another of the carved faces from the Delaware Big House was presented to the Phillbrook Museum, Tulsa.—Ed.

³ Face painting, one half red and one half black, was employed by the leader in some ritualistic practices of the Southeastern tribes, especially the "conjurer" in the ball game (Choctaw, Cherokee), and has been interpreted to indicate "time"—day (red) and night (black), primitive symbols of the clock.—Ed.

handed, he was believed to be powerful because the left side was the heart side.

Mrs. Dennis Frenchman, Copan, who is the daughter of the late Chief Elkhair, has a number of the ceremonial pieces which were used in the Big House services. Chief Elkhair was one of the principle leaders in these annual Big House ceremonies.

In the Delaware mind the Big House was more than four walls and a roof. Big House was representative of the whole world. The floor was the earth, its four walls the four quarters, its vault the sky. The center post was believed to link the great spirit or creator with his people. The term Big House also refers to the ceremony performed in the temple. If the Indians carried on their services properly, they believed there would be a good spring, good summer, good fall, good winter and no earthquakes.

According to a Delaware legend related to Mr. Falleaf by his grandfather, "Many, many long years ago the Delawares quit their church completely. After a bit, an earthquake started. The earth trembled and shook for days. Finally, a spirit appeared to the people telling them to return to the Big House or else, - -! The Delawares did rebuild their Big House, again held their annual services, and the earthquake ceased."⁴

The spirit which appeared was called "*Misi'ng*." His face was half red and half black and he was clothed in bearskin. The carved faces on the House posts were supposedly replicas of this spirit's face.

The man responsible for the annual ceremony which lasted twelve days was referred to as the leader. His position, held in high honor and esteem, was more or less hereditary. The leader for each generation passed his knowledge to a son, nephew or younger cousin so that someone would be ready to take over when he was no longer able to "bring in" the meeting.

That phrase "bringing in" seems to be a general term referring to making all meeting arrangements, appointing three men and three women as the special attendants for the twelve nights of services, inviting people to attend, and the actual leading and conducting of the ceremonies. Naturally, the leader had to be a man inspired to his task. According to Delaware tradition he was in communication with the supernatural world because of a vision of power in his youth.

It was an honor to be appointed an attendant by the leader, but there was hard work attached to the honor. The leader always called

⁴This tale, in slight variation, is also included by Speck in *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony*.

for a meeting in mid-October after the crops were in and fall planting taken care of. Several days before opening ceremonies the six attendants came to the Big House. They pitched their tents on the north and south sides of the small open square just east of the temple. Women lived on one side and the men on the other. Mrs. Davis says she remembers the area just in front of the Big House's east door as being completely bare, hardpacked and neat as a pin. If a chosen woman attendant had small children, friends and relatives were glad to care for them while she fulfilled her task.

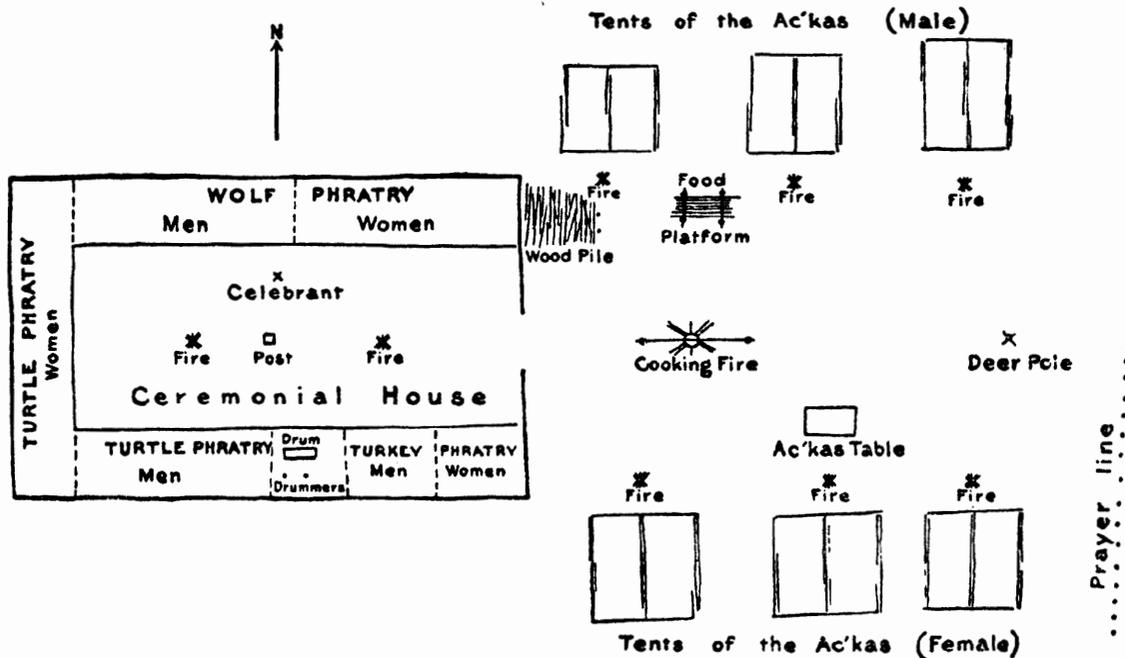
First duties of the attendants were to prepare the building for use after its year of vacancy. Old style mud mortar was put in cracks between the logs. Some distance in front of the Big House a support of saplings was erected for the twenty-gallon kettle in which the women attendants cooked the blue corn hominy which was served in conclusion of each night's meeting. Wood had to be gathered and chopped for both the sacred fires inside the building and the cook fire outside. Inside, the packed earth floor was swept with turkey wings for brooms until the floor was perfectly smooth.

Some of the former attendants for Big House ceremonies included Freddie Washington, his mother Mrs. Joe Washington, Frank Wilson, John Falleaf; of course, there are many others. Arnold Jackson, Charlie Elkhair, Joe Washington and Frank Wilson all served as leaders or speakers. In addition to the leader, attendants and singers, there were also the drummers. M. R. Harrington states in his writings there were only two drummers. Some of the Indians who attended meetings when children thought they remembered four or six. Jim Jackson, Dewey, has recorded some of the songs which were sung only at the annual ceremony in order that they may be preserved.

The fires inside the Big House were considered sacred. They were ignited by a primitive fire-drill rather than white men's matches. Elm wood only was burned. The fire-drill was operated with a pumplike motion which required some skill. According to Delaware belief, a man had to be living right in order to strike fire quickly. If he was deceitful, he might work all day without success.

The two fires were kept burning constantly until the ninth day of the meeting. Then the ashes were carried out the west door (used only for this purpose). A new fire was then started symbolizing a fresh start in all affairs of life. Also, on the ninth night, carved drumsticks and prayer sticks and individually owned turtle shell rattles were brought into use during the ceremony.

When the attendants had all in readiness for the meetings to commence, the Delawares and their families came to the camp ground



PLAN OF LENAPE CEREMONIAL HOUSE AND GROUNDS NEAR DEWEY, OKLAHOMA

which lay a bit beyond the attendants tents and the open square.⁵ As the people pitched their white tents (not tepee), unloaded provisions, greeted friends and relatives, the encampment took on a picnic air. Meals were cooked over open fires in front of each family tent. Many families had special equipment which they kept for Big House camp.

The children ran and played in the wooded area around the tents. If they strayed too far away or became too wild and rollicking, a sort of "bogie man" would come running suddenly from a wooded slope shaking a gourd in frightening fashion. The children would scuttle for their tents as this creature wearing a bearskin jumper and mask, half red and half black, approached. The creature was called the "*Misi'ng*," and one can see his direct relation to the spirit of the legend and the carved faces on the Big House posts. Parents gave the children plug tobacco which they handed to the *Misi'ng* to placate him. This took considerable nerve on the part of a child. Most boys and girls were twelve or fourteen years old before they realized that the *Misi'ng* was a man of their own tribe masquerading as the spirit. He served the purpose nicely in keeping the children close to camp on their good behavior.

Tribal costumes were not required for the ceremonies. Those Indian families who had preserved Indian apparel, however, did wear it with great pride. Men and women attending the meeting were seated according to the clan; Turkey, Turtle or Wolf. Men and women sat separately in the space allotted their particular clan. A child always took the clan of his father. Married women retained their original clan designation. Other tribes were welcome to come to the Big House, also. They did not have the same clan names, of course, but were seated with the Delaware clan most nearly corresponding to their own. For example, members of a Bear clan would be seated with the Delaware Wolf clan.

Each night the leader gave a speech or sermon. First, he stated the rules of the meeting. He reminded the people that they had gathered to pray to "*Gicelemec 'kaong*," worship him, and give thanks for good health and the good things put in the world for their use. Sometimes he spoke of the life beyond this world.⁶ Each evening the speaker's talk followed a similar line; sometimes he

⁵ Speck has this to say with reference to the Attendants in the Big House ceremony (*ibid.*, p. 60): "The Attendants at the Big House ceremony are highly honored with their position as workers whose services, as they are observed by the Great Spirit and the lesser deities, are bringing deep blessing not only to themselves but to the whole of mankind. . . . [Their duties included] "sweeping the 'White Path' in the Big House after each circuit of the dance, the kindling of the sacred fire with the fire drill, keeping the worshippers from falling asleep, driving dogs away from the premises and other labors, constant but blessed."—Ed.

⁶ In Harrington's *Lenape Religion and Ceremonies* portions of a sermon by Charlie Elkhair are given which included all these subjects. Speck also quotes from Big House talks in his books.

had more to say than at others, naturally. Always, however, he tried to tell his story as his father and grandfather had told it.

After the speech the leader started a rattle made of turtle shell around the room. If a man had a vision which he wished to tell, he took the shell. He recited his vision in sing-song style. The ceremonial singers and drummers picked up his words and rhythm. Then the teller or celebrant started dancing and those in the audience who wished, followed him. When the dance was finished, the turtle shell was passed to the next man who had been blessed with a vision, and desired to tell his story. The ceremony dances were not giddy things, but were solemn for the purpose of giving thanks, petitioning forgiveness. Between the singing and dancing of each vision was a short intermission. During this period it was proper for people to enter or leave the Big House.

Those who desired, smoked during the intermission, also. A mixture of sumac leaves and tobacco was available inside the Big House. The individual could smoke his own pipe or one provided along with the sumac-tobacco.

The night's meeting was not over until the turtle shell rattle had made the rounds back to the man who recited first. Sometimes there were so many wishing to tell of visions that the ceremony went on until past daybreak. In later years, however, as interest in the Big House waned and attending crowds dwindled, the meeting was usually over shortly after midnight. At the conclusion of the meeting the hominy or corn mush prepared by women attendants was served. The group cried the prayer word, "Ho-o-o!" twelve times and then were dismissed until the next night. Incidentally, the number twelve had great religious significance because it was believed it took twelve years to reach heaven after death.

One Delaware woman, who attended the Big House when she was a small girl, says she remembers being put to bed in their tent because she grew so sleepy while the rest of her family attended the meeting. When her folks returned to the tent, they would awaken her to give her some of the good warm mush which had been served.

In the daytime the camp was comparatively quiet until noon while the adults rested from the previous night's ceremonies. After the noon meal some of the men chopped wood, and women stacked it for the family campfires. October nights were cold, and the fires provided warmth as well as cooking facilities.

Practice singing sessions were held during the day. In this way music was handed from old to young. Some families who lived fairly close went home for short periods during the day to attend to farm chores. There were, no doubt, much visiting and recounting of the year's happenings among the campers, too.

An aura of mystery surrounds the Delaware vision just as the answering of a Christian's prayer often defies description. In Delaware vernacular a vision was in no sense a dream since the one experiencing such had to be wideawake at the time. Generally these visions appeared in one's youth and by reason of this vision the individual throughout his life was filled with hope and inspiration and power. No longer did his rough life hurt. He had a vision to sustain him and it was during the Big House ceremonies that he told others of his experience.

It is felt by students of Delaware tradition that many parents "pushed around" the children just to encourage them to experience a vision. In reality, the parents were deeply interested in their children's welfare.

On the fourth morning of Big House a deer hunting party was formed. Chief hunter was appointed by the Big House leader. He paid the chief hunter a yard of wampum. This wampum was small, tublar, polished beads made of a hard sea shell. It was the medium of exchange used during the twelve days meeting. Singers, drummers, attendants all were given wampum by the leader. Wampum had low monetary value, but great spiritual significance. When passed between parties it served as a pledge of sincerity and spirit and purity of purpose.

The chief hunter selected as many assistants as he wanted to go along on the expedition. At noon the hunting party was served a special meal of hominy or mush in the Big House. The women attendants also prepared sacks of food to be taken on the trek. After eating, the hunters formed a row and a blessing was asked by the meeting leader that they might have luck in killing the deer.

The hunters left on horseback to be gone three days. If a deer was shot the first day out, it was immediately sent back to camp so that the people could be happy over the good fortune. Any other deer shot were not brought in until the party returned to camp. A game-pole waited in readiness on the east side of the Big House.

The game-pole was a tree completely stripped of bark and leaves. The deer carcasses were hung on the upper branches. One Delaware woman said that the first time she saw a gumdrop tree used in contemporary Christmas decorations, she was reminded of the game-pole she saw when a child at the Big House.

In early days when game was plentiful along the Caney River, hunting parties brought in nine or ten deer. When this happened, the hunters returned shooting their guns and raising a happy hullabaloo. If luck was not so good, the groups came back to camp very quietly. In later years deer hunting became very difficult. John Falleaf recalls that one year when he was chief hunter, not a single deer was found, much to his embarrassment. The deer meat

was cooked by the attendants and served at the meeting feasts each night for the rest of the ceremony. The deerskins were presented to needy older people of the tribe. In the unfortunate years when no deer were shot, beef was eaten.

On the twelfth night when the women of the tribe related their visions, another rite was observed, also. First, cedar leaves were burned in the Big House fires because cedar smoke was believed purifying. Then two women were each given a small bark dish. One dish contained tallow and the other a red paint made from a weed and rocks. Each person in the Big House received a daub of red paint on his left cheek and a bit of tallow or grease at the hairline. Two men attendants then painted and greased the carved faces, drumsticks, deerskin drums, prayer sticks and the turtle shells.

On the last morning the fires were carried from the Big House after a concluding ceremony which lasted until nearly noon. All men, women and children filed out the east door and formed a row, north and south, facing east. All cried together the prayer word "Ho-o-o!" or "Ha-a-a!" six times standing and six times kneeling. The twelve-day meeting was then finished and the Big House closed for another year.

The only semblance left of Big House religion is the Peyote or Native American Church.⁷ Its members have also adopted some of the Catholic ideas to their own religion. In this northeastern Oklahoma vicinity the American Native Church conducts an annual tent meeting on the farm of Freddie Washington and his mother.

⁷Speck, *Oklahoma Delaware Indian Ceremonies, Feasts and Dances*, p. 6. The "Native American Church" has a charter from the State of Oklahoma, and counts its members principally among the Indian tribes in Western Oklahoma who use peyote as a part of the sacrament in their religious practices. The charter for the incorporation of this church was given by the State on October 18, 1918. The central church of the organization was established at El Reno, Oklahoma.—Ed.