

INDIAN MISSIONS OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
IN OKLAHOMA

By Sam L. Botkin\*

The Protestant Episcopal Church sent its first white missionary to take charge of the field of Indian missions in Indian Territory, in 1881. Lack of missionary organization, too much demand for expenditures elsewhere, and lack of missionaries have been blamed by Episcopal historians for the failure to enter the picture in the Territory where the Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists were active for many decades before statehood.<sup>1</sup>

Four Episcopal bishops visited Indian Territory at the time other denominational groups were establishing and operating missions among the Five Civilized Tribes. Jackson Kemper of Missouri and Leonidas K. Polk of Tennessee were separately in the Territory in 1838, visiting Ft. Gibson and nearby points, Polk establishing a preaching station at Gibson. James H. Otey of Arkansas covered a similar territory in 1844 and 1845 with N. Sayre Harris, secretary of the Board of Missions of the Church. George W. Freeman traveled throughout Cherokee and Choctaw lands in 1847. In each instance, the conclusion was drawn that other denominations had preempted the obvious missionary opportunities and that new work was not possible under the circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Secretary Harris made an offer to Roley McIntosh, Chief of the Creek Nation, suggesting that the Episcopal Church

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<sup>1</sup>Julia C. Emery, *A Century of Endeavor* (New York, 1921), p. 68f.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 68, 82, 86f. (A report on Indian Affairs for 1837 lists the first public services of the Episcopal Church held in the Indian Territory, by the Mohawk Indian tribal members who had settled on the Seneca lands in what is now Ottawa County, Oklahoma. This band of Mohawks had migrated from New York and located with the Seneca of Sandusky. The majority of the band could read the gospels in Mohawk; they read the book of Common Prayer and sang hymns in carrying on religious exercises. Isaac White was their principal chief, and George Herron, second chief.—Ed.)

attempt to set up an all-Indian church in the Creek Nation, with Indian priests and possibly even an Indian bishop at some future time. The suggestion was received with apparent interest, but no action was forthcoming from the Creeks. Harris was fully discouraged in regard to possibilities for his church by the time he left the Territory in 1845.<sup>3</sup>

Bishop Freeman rejected what may have been an opportunity for the Church to become involved in the life of the Chickasaw Nation. In 1848, Chickasaw chiefs asked that the Episcopal Church be given direction of a proposed manual training school under the plan in effect at the time, by virtue of which the U. S. Government would provide \$6,000 annually for a school after it had been established by Church authorities and funds. Some attempts were made to raise money for the school; but Bishop Freeman cancelled the project when he became convinced that Governmental demands called for "exercising a type of Government control which was inconsistent with the type of control set up by Constitutional law for supervision of missionaries by the Board of Missions."<sup>4</sup>

Thus ended all attempts by Bishop Freeman to establish missions in the Territory. His successor after the Civil War was Henry Champlin Lay, whose jurisdiction included Arkansas, Indian Territory, Texas, and other parts of the Great Southwest.<sup>5</sup> In 1870, Arkansas and Indian Territory were set aside as a separate jurisdiction and put under the charge of Henry Niles Pierce, who served as Bishop of Arkansas until his death in 1899.<sup>6</sup> Bishop Pierce found it impossible to do more than make exploratory trips into Indian Territory in 1889, 1890, and 1891.<sup>7</sup> One Indian missionary effort was begun during his episcopate, without his assistance on the ground.

That one missionary enterprise was brought into being by the Reverend John Bartlett Wicks, an Episcopal priest of Paris Hill, New York, who trained young Indians for missionary work and took two of them, David Pendleton Oakerhater (Medicine-Maker) and Paul Zotom, with him to Indian

<sup>3</sup> Emery, *op. cit.*, p. 84

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Rt. Rev. George Washington Freeman to the Board of Missions of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1848, pages not numbered, in files of Protestant Episcopal Church at Southwest Seminary Library, Austin, Texas. (The Chickasaw Council had provided for the Chickasaw Manual Labor School for boys, building in 1848, and opened in 1851 under the supervision of the Methodist Church, South, near Tishomingo.—Ed.)

<sup>5</sup> William W. Manross, *A History of the American Episcopal Church* (New York, 1935), p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Emery, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop Pierce's diary, containing a description of the trips, is in the historiographer's files of the Diocese of Arkansas, Little Rock.

Territory as missionaries to the people among whom they had formerly been warriors. Wick's proteges had been military prisoners at Pensacola, Florida, under Captain R. H. Pratt, the army officer whose interest in Indians led to his appointment as the first head of Carlisle Indian School. Oakerhater was a Cheyenne, Zotom a Kiowa; the former concentrated his efforts in the vicinity of Darlington Agency and the latter moved on to a site near Anadarko. Mr. Wicks worked at both places, erecting a chapel at the Kiowa Agency and a home and mission facilities at Fay, near Darlington. He suffered a breakdown in health in 1884 and left Oklahoma. Oakerhater continued working with a group of several dozen confirmed Cheyennes, but Zotom soon ceased ministerial efforts among the Kiowas.<sup>8</sup> More about Oakerhater will be told later.

At Anadarko, from 1896 to 1903, Miss Ida Roff conducted a lace-making school under the auspices of the Woman's Auxiliary to the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church. She also taught Sunday School classes and attempted to keep some activity alive in the chapel which John Wicks had erected. The Anadarko lace school was one of eight such institutions begun by Miss Sybil Carter of the national Woman's Auxiliary. Indian women were able to sell their lace-work readily, and received approximately ten cents an hour for their labor. More than fifty women at Anadarko, and occasionally a husband or two, became interested in the work. A Christmas worship service at the school in 1898 drew together Christian Kiowas, Comanches, Apaches, Delawares and Caddos. Miss Roff's work was discontinued after she married an Episcopal priest and left Anadarko in 1903.<sup>9</sup>

Not especially concerned with Indian work, but certainly an important institution in Indian Territory, was the Episcopal hospital erected through the efforts of Bishop Francis Key Brooke at South McAlester following a coal mine disaster. All Saints Hospital, as it was called, found its facilities taxed to the utmost during most of its life span, from 1896 to 1924. It was the object of much of the time and effort expended by Bishop Brooke, Oklahoma's first diocesan. Perhaps it is

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<sup>8</sup> *Primary Convocation Journal of the Missionary District of Oklahoma and Indian Territory* (Guthrie, 1895), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

significant that the hospital slipped out of Episcopal ownership three years after the Bishop died in 1918.<sup>10</sup>

Another very special project of Francis Key Brooke was the Cheyenne mission and mission school which had been located at Darlington, later was moved to Fay, and finally was centered at Whirlwind Day School, a one-time Government institution which was taken over by the Episcopal Church. By far the largest Episcopal Indian congregation in Oklahoma or Indian Territory from 1881 until the present has been the one among the Cheyennes.<sup>11</sup> Instrumental in the perpetuation of the work after the departure of the Reverend J. B. Wicks were Bishop Brooke, who arrived in Oklahoma in 1893; David Sanford, a priest who served in the area from 1896 to 1907; Miss Hariett Bedell, an energetic missionary teacher who remained from 1907 to 1917; and above all David Pendleton Oakerhater, who stayed on the job from 1881 until his death in 1931.<sup>12</sup>

From the time of its inception in 1897, Whirlwind School had been something of a problem to Government Indian officials. Despite constant efforts by the Government to persuade Indians to live on and farm their allotted lands, the Cheyennes and Arapahos who sent their children to day schools insisted upon camping in the vicinity of the schools, particularly the one called Whirlwind in honor of the memory of a chief who had been friendly to the U. S. Government at a critical time.<sup>13</sup> In 1901, the day school was abandoned; this was a severe disappointment to David Sanford, Episcopal missionary in the vicinity who had worked hard among the students and encamped parents. With Bishop Brooke's help, Sanford obtained permission to continue a day school in the same buildings, under Church auspices, beginning in 1904. The operation of the school itself seems to have been successful; it was popular with the Indians, and produced better than average students. Apparently the idea of the Indian

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<sup>10</sup> Hospital reports were printed annually in the *Convocation Journal, Missionary District of Oklahoma and Indian Territory*, 1895 through 1908; in the *Convocation Journal, Missionary District of Eastern Oklahoma*, 1911 through 1918; in the *Convocation Journal, Missionary District of Oklahoma*, 1909 through 1924.

<sup>11</sup> *Journal, Oklahoma and Indian Territory*; *Journal, Oklahoma*; and *Journal, Eastern Oklahoma*, rosters of congregations appended from 1895 until present date.

<sup>12</sup> Oakerhater's presence and work are described in most of the Journals from 1895 to 1931.

<sup>13</sup> Chief Whirlwind had helped avoid what appeared to be a major war in 1874. J. J. H. Reedy, "Whirlwind Indian Day School," *Indian School Journal*, Vol. IV (April, 1909). (The old Whirlwind Cemetery near the site of the Mission is about 13 miles west of Greenfield in Blaine County.—Ed.)

Agent at Darlington had been to permit the school to exist as a place for students whose ill health prevented their attending boarding schools. Complications developed, however, when several able-bodied students showed up each year, with their parents, hoping to attend Whirlwind Mission school and to have the parents join the nearby camp.<sup>14</sup>

David Sanford, encouraged by the Bishop, worked hard to convince the campers they should farm their allotted lands. He attained some success. Furthermore, he attempted to impose rigid conditions of sanitation and moral life among the residents of the community. Life at the camp at time left much to be desired. It certainly was a source of irritation for the Darlington Agency, which wanted the camp dissolved and hoped that able-bodied students would be placed in boarding schools.<sup>15</sup>

Sanford argued against boarding schools, claiming they were breeders of disease, and causes of great unhappiness among the Indian families. He acknowledged the weaknesses of the camping system, but was highly critical on the other hand of the way certain Indian officials were handling leasing and housing arrangements. He feuded with the superintendent of a nearby Government boarding school. He became extremely unpopular among some of the white farmers of the area, apparently because he tried to help his Indian friends obtain more profitable leasing arrangements. One charge against Sanford was that he taught Indians some of the unethical methods of land-leasing which had more commonly been associated with whites.<sup>16</sup>

Sanford was a veteran minister, in his late fifties. Bishop Brooke considered him a valuable Indian missionary, but privately admitted it would be most difficult to use him in another type of work. Therefore the Bishop was most reluctant to dismiss Sanford from his Whirlwind School post. Severely ill feelings developed in 1906 between Charles Shell, Cheyenne Agent, and the Bishop when Shell demanded that Sanford be fired and threatened to cut off all cooperation with the school unless the missionary be sent elsewhere. Bishop Brooke felt that undue pressure was being applied upon him, and resisted through a series of delaying tactics. The school was continued in 1906 with the understanding, Agent Shell

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<sup>14</sup> Reports of Whirlwind Indian Day School, Cheyenne and Arapaho files, Oklahoma Historical Society Collection, Oklahoma City.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Undated multigraphed petition, signed by some thirty-five white farmers of the Watonga area, apparently submitted to the Office of Indian Affairs in 1907, lists grievances against Sanford.

thought, that Sanford would be replaced as soon as possible. Bishop Brooke finally admitted he did not plan to remove the missionary, who had become more and more unpopular with Government officials. Superiors at Washington supported Agent Shell's point of view, requiring however that Shell permit the school to re-open with Sanford in charge in 1907, with the understanding that a replacement would be immediately forthcoming. Letters exchanged between Shell and Bishop Brooke indicate that two well-meaning men became extremely hostile toward each other. The tragic death of the Bishop's only son by drowning in 1907 softened the attitude of his adversary. After Sanford left, early in 1908, Whirlwind School was given strong Government support.<sup>17</sup>

James J. H. Reedy was Sanford's successor as priest at Whirlwind; he moved to another location a year later.<sup>18</sup> The real successor to David Sanford at the School was Miss Harriet Bedell, who like the former was to become very popular with many persons, and equally unpopular with others. Like Sanford, she was filled with zeal for the Indian and like him, too, she was at times outspoken in her discussion of persons she did not consider to be friends of the Indian. Like her predecessor again, she was able to maintain a school with an enrollment of at least thirty, sometimes as high as fifty, students, "five to seventeen years old."<sup>19</sup>

Miss Bedell became one of the most prominent writers for national Episcopal magazines such as the *Spirit of Missions*, relating her outdoor experiences and telling of travels to camps such as those at Watonga, Deer Creek, Thomas, Old Crow, Etna, Roman Nose.<sup>20</sup> It was at these very camps that a new enemy to the mission school, the peyote-smoking religious rite, gained prominence and probably became the direct cause of the discontinuance of the school. Bishop Brooke admitted in 1916 that peyote had become prevalent among friends and former friends of the Church. He blamed the Government for not having passed or enforced strict prohibitory regulations, but nevertheless admitted that continuation of the school presented grave problems.<sup>21</sup> In 1917, Miss Bedell transferred her area of work to Alaska, and Whirlwind School ceased to exist.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Letter from J. J. H. Reedy to C. E. Shell, March 31, 1908, in Cheyenne and Arapaho files.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal, Oklahoma*, 1908, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Spirit of Missions*, LXXV (1910), p. 452.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII (1910), p. 776 f.

<sup>21</sup> *Journal, Oklahoma*, 1916, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

The one representative of the Church who was on the scene among the Cheyennes during the half-century which marked the transition from a savage tribe to a relatively law-abiding group of citizens was David Oakerhater. Known commonly as David Pendleton (his Christian name), he had returned in 1881 to the same people he had led into war as late as 1875. That David was a leader among leaders is evidenced by the fact that he was delegated by the "young chiefs" in prison in Pensacola, Florida, in 1878 to speak in their behalf, asking that they receive educational opportunities. He became a Christian under the guidance of Captain R. H. Pratt; he studied for the ministry under the Reverend J. B. Wicks, and was ordained a deacon in 1881.<sup>23</sup> He was never to be advanced to the priesthood, therefore never had the privilege of celebrating Holy Communion among his flock and probably was severely handicapped as a result. He suffered personal loss in New York when his wife and son, who were permitted to travel from Indian Territory to live with him, both died in 1879. However, he remarried after returning to live among the Cheyennes. His destiny was to be a dweller among the campers, a servant of the Church whose efforts were for fifty years expended in the attempt to improve living conditions and moral habits of his friends. Reports from 1910 to 1917 pertaining to students at the school indicate that while most of the residents of the adjacent camp were sufferers from various diseases, glaucoma and tuberculosis in particular, David Pendleton's family was always healthy and its tent life exemplary.<sup>24</sup> David identified himself with his people, lived among them, and yet lived above them in a sense which provided uplifting leadership. David Sanford and Harriett Bedell stated that the Indian deacon quietly and patiently obeyed and cooperated with them.<sup>25</sup> All the time, of course, they were utterly dependent upon him for such duties as translation, gaining Indian cooperation, and providing of information which would permit mutual understanding. The success of the mission and mission school was due above all to the work of the resident Indian minister, David Pendleton.

When Anadarko became a lively town after the land opening of 1901, the work at that location became principally a white man's project rather than an Indian's.<sup>26</sup> Another Episco-

<sup>23</sup> John B. Wicks, "David Oakerhater," *Oklahoma and Indian Territory Churchman*, January, 1900, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Reports of inspectors of Whirlwind Indian Day School, in Cheyenne and Arapaho files, Oklahoma Historical Society Collection.

<sup>25</sup> *Journal, Oklahoma, 1917*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Journal, Oklahoma and Indian Territory, 1902* report of Anadarko mission appended.

pal mission among Indians but principally for whites, was established in 1885 by Charles Campbell, a deacon from West Virginia, at Prairie City twenty-five miles east of Vinita in Cherokee country. Campbell had a Sunday School with several dozen students, and residents of the village erected a building for his use. He departed in 1886, and the work stopped. Prairie City, too, disappeared a few years later.<sup>27</sup> Other occasional Episcopalian efforts have been at Chilocco and Concho Indian Schools, where in each instance regular Episcopal services were conducted by visiting priests from 1907 to sometime in the 1920's.<sup>28</sup> At Skullyville among the Choctaws, Oak Lodge Episcopal mission was started in 1891 by an Arkansas priest. The mission was united with the church at Spiro in 1912.

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<sup>27</sup> Charles M. Campbell, "The Prairie City Mission," *Oklahoma and Indian Territory Churchman*, September, 1900, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Journals from 1907 to 1930, reports appended.