

## LEE F. HARKINS, CHOCTAW

By Muriel H. Wright

It is more than a passing note in writing on the life of Lee F. Harkins that the place of honor on the walls of his home was given a portrait of the great Choctaw, Chief Pushmataha. The story of this renowned chieftain and the portrait, too, were both an inspiration and a symbol for Lee Harkins' deep interest as a collector of many rare imprints, pamphlets and manuscripts relating to the history of the Five Civilized Tribes, particularly that of the Choctaws.

Lee Harkins was a writer, editor and publisher at different times though he continued as a printer by trade, a member of the Newspaper Printing Corporation, in the composing room of *The Tulsa Tribune* for many years. This regular work limited his time and resources, a circumstance that reveals the character of the man whose labor of love went far afield in research and bringing together a fine collection of American Indian materials. Lee Harkins wrote in the *Antiquarian Bookman* for January 13, 1951, saying in part: "I was thrilled recently, in the rare book department of the New York Public Library, as I fondled a copy of Roman's *History of East and West Florida*. Therein I could see my people, as depicted some 175 years ago, on the pages as they played their dramatic part of life. And when my water well turns into an oil well, I'll have this item in my Choctaw library." Sometime later in 1954, Lee was thrilled to see a well producing oil on his Indian allotment but the royalty checks were too small to have Roman's *History of East and West Florida* among his books.

He wrote "The Story of Pushmataha" in 1938 that appeared as series in the *Neshoba Democrat* of Philadelphia, Mississippi. Other articles on Pushmataha and some noted American Indians appeared in the *American Indian* with Harkins as the editor and publisher. The *American Indian* magazine was his great venture, the first issue appearing in 1926 and the last, in 1931. He was always proud of the files of his *American Indian* though it took him several years to make up the deficit of the expense for its publication. The first issue of the magazine carries an editorial saying that it is "devoted to presentation of every day Indian news and the preservation of Indian lore." And its aim given is to become "a true reservoir of Indian life and history based on authentic articles from Indian and white writers." Yet Lee F. Harkins is remembered as an outstanding collector of historical materials, for he saved much that would have been lost to Oklahoma in his day, in a field where few, if any, others were his equal in devotion and interest. The following excerpts are from a review of Harkins' work as

a collector and editor, in the *Sooner State Press*, Norman, for May 5, 1951.<sup>1</sup>

He has one of the most valuable collections on the Five Civilized Tribes, including an 1836 edition of the Choctaw First Reader in the Choctaw tongue, and an 1850 Park Hill reprint of the Bible in Cherokee. . . . He likes to help people with research on Indians, and he believes too few people know of the American Indians' impressive background. Harkins studied journalism at the University of Oklahoma two years and edited the Indian edition of the *Whirlwind* magazine in February, 1923. He published the *American Indian* magazine in Tulsa from 1926 to 1931, and its files are kept in leading libraries.

Lee Harkins was a descendant of Choctaw chiefs, and looked the part of a chieftain himself, for he was a man of fine physique, tall and well proportioned. He was friendly and genial, and found time in his busy life to appear before clubs and churches to tell about his ancestors and other noted Indians in history. He was a descendant of the LeFlore family (Choctaw-French), of which the notable chief, Greenwood LeFlore was a member. A few weeks after signing the Treaty at Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, providing for the removal of the Choctaws from Mississippi, Chief LeFlore appointed his nephew, George W. Harkins (1st)—Lee Harkins' great-great uncle—to explore and select locations for the settlement of the Choctaws in their new country west. When George W. Harkins returned from this expedition in the winter of 1831, he found that he had been appointed district chief of the Second District (the Red River or Oklafalaya District) in the new country to represent his uncle, Chief LeFlore who remained in Mississippi. Colonel Harkins was a well educated man for his time, and wrote a "Farewell Letter" in behalf of the Choctaws to the people of Mississippi as he was leaving his old country in 1832, to make his home in the west. This letter is a part of a story on the Choctaw removal, published in one of the early issues of Lee Harkins' *American Indian* magazine. In 1850, George W. Harkins was elected and served as chief of the Second District then called "Apukshenubbee District," Choctaw Nation.

One of Lee Harkins' great-great grandfathers was Colonel David Folsom, a noted chief in Mississippi, who had served as interpreter and aide to Chief Pushmataha in Washington in 1824. Another of Lee's great-grandfathers, was Benjamin F. Smallwood who was elected and served as Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation, 1888-1890. Lee's parents were Will M. Harkins and Amy Harkins. His mother before her marriage was Amy James of Chickasaw descent through her maternal line, of the well known Burney family in the Chickasaw Nation.

<sup>1</sup> *The Tulsa World* for Sunday, March 9, 1958, has a feature article, "A Great Choctaw" by Orpha B. Russell, telling of Lee Harkins and his collections.

Lee never married, and always affectionately referred to his "little mother" whom he took care of to the end of her life.

Lee Fitzhugh Harkins was born at Boggy Depot, Choctaw Nation, on February 22, 1898. He graduated from high school at Tishomingo, and served in the armed forces in World War I. He attended the University of Oklahoma for two years where he studied journalism before he began work on a Coalgate newspaper. He also worked on a newspaper at Sulphur and played baseball on the Sulphur team. He was a printer for a time in Oklahoma City, and then moved to Tulsa where he died on May 6, 1957, mourned by many friends. At the time of his death, he was a member of Tulsa Chapter 52 of Royal Arch Masons, Pilgrim Lodge No. 522 A.F. & A.M., Albert Pike Consistory Club and Scottish Rite Mason. He was an advisory director of the National Indian Hall of Fame for Famous American Indians at Anadarko, and charter member of the Five Civilized Tribes Museum at Muskogee. He was a member of the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Oklahoma Philatelic Society and Typographical Union (No. 403).

The Harkins' collection of imprints, manuscripts and pictures are now in the Indian Archives, the Library and the Museum of the Oklahoma Historical Society, the accessions having been from the Lee F. Harkins' Estate through special provisions made by the Board of Directors of the Society. The books out of a total of 1,430 titles include such volumes as Daniel Coxe's *A Description of the English Province of Carolina, by the Spaniards Called Florida and by the French, La Louisiana*, with maps of "Carolana and the River Meschacebe," 1741; volumes of the old laws and out-of-print histories of the Cherokees, the Creeks, the Chickasaws and the Choctaws; dictionaries and "lexicons" of the Choctaws; and genealogies of the Folsom Family in America. The pamphlets numbering 972 items which archivists and historians judged the finest part of the Harkins' collection, include such titles as *Louisiana and Mississippi Almanac*, Natchez, 1813; *A Continuation of the Narrative of the Indian Charity School, in Lebanon, in Connecticut; from the Year 1768 to the Incorporation of it with Dartmouth College, and Removal and Settlement of it in Hanover, in the Province of New Hampshire, 1771* by Eleazor Wheelock, D.D., President of Dartmouth College, published 1774; *The Vindicator*, newspaper printed at Boggy Depot, early 1870's. The rare books, the pamphlets (which include an uncounted number of manuscript materials and old letters) and the pictures (152) including the portrait of Chief Pushmataha in the Oklahoma Historical Society are a memorial to one who loved his native Oklahoma and the history of the American Indian people, Lee F. Harkins, Choctaw.