

JOE KAGEY: INDIAN EDUCATOR

By A. M. Gibson

The education of the American Indian has been a continuing concern throughout the history of Anglo-Indian relations. Both the United States Government and various missionary church groups have sought to hasten acculturation of the American Indian by establishing schools among the nations and tribes. Since Oklahoma has at least one-third of all the Indians in the United States, a high percentage of these schools has been situated in this state. At the turn of the century there were twenty-five schools for the Indian in operation in Oklahoma, operated as day as well as boarding schools, and supported by church groups and the government, at times jointly.¹

This would be the highwater mark for the number of schools in operation and the number of Indian families served. After 1910, the United States Government began to take over the complete operation of many of these schools. Thereupon, claiming the need for economy, the government has closed Indian schools here and there until only seven remain in operation in the state today. One of these extant schools is the Seneca Indian School at Wyandotte, Oklahoma.

Established in 1869 by the Society of Friends as a missionary venture among the Wyandottes, Senecas, and Shawnees, this institution is a monument to Quaker ingenuity, thrift, and dedication to high purpose.² In spite of ever-recurring hardships and what seemed to be insurmountable problems, the missionaries of this brotherhood persevered, and finally succeeded in carving a center of learning from the rock-bound hills and forests of Lost Creek Valley. Acclaimed by many early-day visitors as "The Marvel of the West," Seneca Indian School supplied a course of study based on the objective of educating the heart, head, and hand of Wyandotte, Seneca, and Shawnee youths. The successful record of its graduates in business, professions, the arts, skilled trades, and farming reflect well on the goal of the school's founders. As was the case with other Indian schools, the United States Government took over more and more of the operation of Seneca Indian School until by 1900, except for a few special gifts in books or clothing supplied by the Society of Friends, Seneca Indian School was

¹ A common relationship was for the government to pay the teacher's salaries, the church missionary group taking care of the other operating expenses. At times tribal funds were used to support these schools too.

² For a history of Seneca School before 1900, see A. M. Gibson, "Wyandotte Mission: the Early Years," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXXVI (July, 1958), 137-154.

entirely under the direction of the government. All too often, government operation of Indian schools has meant impersonal administration, sacrificial efficiency, and even disinterestedness.

Seneca Indian School presents an exception to this general rule, largely through the long administration of the Dean of modern Indian educators, the late Joe N. Kagey, a Virginian, who served the cause of Indian education in Oklahoma for nearly fifty years. Joe Kagey joined a massive migration into Oklahoma, a human movement that got under way during the land rush days, and came from the North and South, the East and West. By 1913, when Kagey left Virginia for the West, people were still coming in large numbers, largely because of the abundant opportunities the new state offered. Most of these people came to serve their own interests. A few, typified by Joe Kagey, came to serve others.

Born in Rockingham County, Virginia, in 1890, Kagey graduated from Bridgewater College in 1912. After a brief stint at teaching in local public schools, he journeyed West, making a stop at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There he met a fellow Virginian, Cyrus Beery, who was in the East recruiting teachers for the Indian tribes of Oklahoma. Beery, with a lifetime of teaching in the Choctaw Nation, was too old to return, and during his conference with young Kagey, encouraged him to come to the Choctaw country. Enthused by Beery's reports of the opportunities in the new country, and carrying letters of recommendation from the venerable missionary, Kagey journeyed to Muskogee, Oklahoma, in those early days of statehood, still the Union Agency or administrative center for the Five Civilized Tribes.³

At Muskogee, Kagey received his first assignment in Indian education. Goodland School and Orphanage, in the old Choctaw Nation near Hugo, needed a teacher and counselor for boys. While Goodland was a Presbyterian Mission Board operation, the school was on a government contract by which the Indian Service paid the teachers' salaries.

Goodland School, rich in tradition and replete with big names in Choctaw Nation spiritual and intellectual history—Cyrus Kingsbury, Cyrus Byington, and Alfred Wright—was first established as an Indian mission in 1848 by Cyrus Kingsbury and the Presbyterian Board of Missions. Called "Yakni Aekukma" by the Choctaws, and meaning "Goodland" because of its numerous springs, abundant timber, and fertile soil in the area, Byington's mission was converted into a school and orphanage for Choctaw children in 1850 by Reverend and Mrs.

³ Much of the material used in this biography is based on notes made from interviews with the late Joe Kagey during the summer of 1958, and with Mrs. Joe Kagey in September, 1959.

Oliver Porter Stark. Goodland School was slightly over sixty years old when Joe Kagey came to the campus, and just as Stark and other Indian educators left a part of themselves at Goodland through devoted service and enthusiastic leadership, so did Kagey.

While Kagey's college training was in the field of Fine Arts—painting and music, he early showed very practical traits necessary for a frontier situation. His prompt attention to a run-down school farm increased food production, and did much to improve the diet of the children at Goodland. Winter storage of potatoes, yams, and other farm products, plus better preservation of meat, insured a balanced ration for each student the year round.

Quite soon after his arrival at Goodland, Kagey, displayed his interest in vocational education for Indian youth, an objective often discussed, but seldom applied in the Indian Service. Early experiments tried, and lessons learned at Goodland, he later applied with success at other Indian schools in Oklahoma. As a teacher at Goodland, Kagey imparted, besides the fundamentals of learning, some of his specialty—the Fine Arts, and developed among the Choctaw children a deeper sense of the beautiful. So effective was his teaching and oversight of student activities, and keen his interest shown in the welfare of Choctaw children at Goodland, that in a short while Kagey was promoted to the position of Assistant Principal.

While Kagey's first assignment at the Goodland School ended in 1917, his service there left an indelible print on the school offerings as well as its operation. His boundless energy showed up in the enthusiasm of faculty and students at the school, a richer curriculum, better food production on the school farms, and full harvest bins and larders for winter's use.

In 1917, Kagey was transferred to Jones Academy, also in the Choctaw Country, near Hartshorne. He brought with him his skill in organizing courses, stimulating student enthusiasm, and more efficient use of school shops and farms through vocational education. Kagey's program at Jones Academy for Choctaw boys hardly got off the ground when the United States entered World War I. Kagey entered the Armed Forces in 1917, and served for over a year with the Army. Upon his discharge Kagey returned to Jones Academy, where he served the cause of Indian education until 1927, and his service record shows that Kagey played a leading role in providing expansion of the physical plant with more adequate classroom and dormitory space, a more diversified curriculum, and extension of the school farm so as to assure a more stable food supply.

For many years the Indian Office allowed only twenty cents or less per day to feed each student enrolled. This token

allowance not only had to pay for flour, sugar, salt, cornmeal, and other staples, but also it was extended to cover the cost of transportation of staples from the supplier to the campus, as well as the expense of cooks and other kitchen help in preparing food so purchased. Kagey's plan of developing a program of food production on the school farms, coupled with the raising of poultry, hogs, and cattle, assured a better diet with milk, meat, and vegetables. Also, the students received valuable vocational training in farming, animal husbandry, and poultry care.

Following Kagey's return to Jones Academy from the service, besides active oversight of a shop and farm vocational program, he taught the eighth and ninth grades, and served as Principal. Shortly before his departure from Jones Academy, Kagey was raised to the position of academy Superintendent.

In 1927, Kagey returned to Goodland School. This institution had languished during his absence. Most of all, Goodland needed the enthusiasm, driving energy, and forceful leadership such as Kagey had supplied during his earlier stint at the school. The school records show an increased enrollment, more effective support of the school, and expansion of physical plant during the year of Joe Kagey's return.

With Goodland in a good state of recovery, Kagey left the Choctaw country in 1928 for an assignment at Seneca Indian School near Wyandotte, Oklahoma. Just previous to Joe Kagey's arrival at Seneca Indian School, the Indian Office had set a new policy for this institution. Until 1828, the school had largely been operated for the benefit of the Wyandot, Seneca, and Shawnee tribes, with a few Peoria, Quapaw, and Modoc children of the neighboring area included in the annual enrollment.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs adopted the policy at this time of forcing local Indian children to attend the public schools of Ottawa County, and took steps to close the Seneca Indian School. Mr. O. K. Chandler, a Cherokee Indian, and Superintendent of the Quapaw Agency, a juristiction which included the Seneca Indian School, worked diligently to keep the school open. His campaign to preserve historic Seneca Indian School included a request that the Bureau of Indian Affairs make an investigation to determine the future service the school could serve in Indian education.

Officials of the Indian Service carried out Chandler's recommendation, and following an investigation, it was decided to keep the school open, but change its policy of admittance: First, open it to children of all tribes in the United States; and Second, establish it as an "institutional case" type of

school (i.e., children admitted must be hardship cases, coming from broken homes, orphans, or related causes). This new enrollment policy produced marked changes in the makeup of the student body early in Kagey's administration of the Seneca Indian School. Whereas before it had consisted largely of Senecas, Shawnees, and Wyandots, with a few Quapaws, Peorias, and Modocs, the new policy produced a much more diversified group of learners as is indicated by a report for the year 1933:⁴ Cherokees 163; Senecas 28; Quapaws 5; Ottawas 3; Shawnees 28; Seneca-Shawnee 3; Cherokee-Delaware 2; Cayuga 2; Wyandot 3; Modoc 1, Shawnee-Delaware 3; Wyandot-Sioux 1; Creek 5; Peoria 3; Arapaho 3.

The entrance requirements of the new admittance policy for Seneca Indian School included that each applicant must be at least one-quarter Indian. In the year 1952, when there were 273 Indian children enrolled, with an age range for grades one through nine of six to twenty, the degree of Indian blood was:⁵ Full-blood, 75; Three-quarter, 73, One-half, 57; One-quarter, 68.

For the same period, to illustrate the diversity of tribes served, the institutional reports show:⁶ Cherokee, 173; Creek, 33; Creek-Seminole, 10; Seneca, 12; Chickasaw, 1; Sac-Fox, 1; Osage, 5; Cherokee-Osage, 5; Cherokee-Shawnee, 6; Otoe-Creek, 1; Otoe-Cherokee, 1; Choctaw, 4; Choctaw-Cherokee, 2; Choctaw-Chickashaw, 1.

Intervening reports reveal that the Seneca Indian School has also educated children of the various Sioux tribes, as well as Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Comanche.

Joe Kagey served at the Seneca Indian School as Principal from 1928 until his retirement in 1956. Working at his side throughout this period, and equally dedicated to the cause of educating the youth of the Indian Nations was Mrs. Joe Kagey. Born near Tuskahoma, and for years a teacher at Tuskahoma, Sequoyah, and Jones Academy, Mrs. Kagey, the former Miss Aline Holman, and Mr. Kagey were married in 1921. Joining the faculty at Seneca Indian School in 1928, Mrs. Kagey taught music, dramatics, and physical education.

Each year of the Kagey administration at Seneca Indian School saw some improvement in curriculum or expansion of the physical plant. Old structures, some of them dating from 1882, were remodeled and made serviceable again. A new

⁴ "Seneca Indian School," *The Oklahoma Indian School Magazine*, II (March, 1933), 7.

⁵ Manuscript report of Attendance for the Year Beginning September 4, 1951, and Ending May 21, 1952. Kagey Collection, Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library.

⁶ *Ibid.*

bakery and laundry were erected, and Indian Office inspectors rated these as the best to be found in the Indian Service. In the 1930's, a new dormitory for girls and a boys' dormitory, each constructed of brick, were completed. For safety, due to distance from larger towns, a volunteer fire department was organized on the campus, and a new fire truck purchased. Gradually mechanics, carpentry, and farm equipment shops were built, "most of the manpower provided by the 267 students enrolled."⁷

Under Kagey's directorship, the school budget was nearly doubled in less than twenty years, ranging up to a high of \$125,000 in 1949.⁸ This enabled him to increase the staff, diversify the academic and vocational offerings, and develop a remarkable student activity program. It is significant that Kagey was friendly to new ideas in education, and was not hesitant in adopting the latest advancements in teaching and administration, if such changes increased the effectiveness of Seneca Indian School as a center of learning and training.

The school staff, which included a fireman, farmer, dairyman, girls' advisor, matrons and dorm attendants, was increased from eighteen to twenty-seven. The instructional program was improved by an increase in the faculty. When Kagey arrived on the campus, the Seneca Indian School teaching staff consisted of six. Within two years, Kagey's faculty numbered ten.

The curriculum at the Seneca Indian School was coordinated with course offerings prescribed by the State Department of Education and local public schools, and the faculty met regular State certification requirements. All nine grades at Seneca Indian School received accreditation by the State Department of Education and North Central Association during Kagey's administration. A library had been started before 1928. It underwent considerable change following Kagey's appointment, in that he started a program of regular growth whereby at least 200 books were added each year.

Principal Kagey organized the school schedule on a three-quarter day system whereby the students attended academic classes one day, then for the next half-day participated in vocational exercises. The boys worked in the school carpentry and machine shops, and were instructed in animal husbandry, modern farm management, and maintenance. Girls were taught cooking, sewing, home management, and grooming.

Besides regular study hall each evening, the students participated in literary and debating societies. Wits were sharpened by periodic contests in spelling and ciphering bees.

⁷ *Miami Daily News Record*, November 13, 1949.

⁸ *Ibid.*

A rhythm band was organized for the primary grades, a harmonica band for the upper grades, and a music appreciation class was held for all. These and similar programs were installed by Kagey to make the learning process more provocative. With all these inducements toward learning supplied by the Kagey administration, the rate of continued study for graduates of Seneca Indian School was good. Many subsequently enrolled at Chilocco, Haskell, and Carlyle, as well as the public high schools and colleges.

Besides a first rate academic program, Seneca Indian School also developed an extensive extra-curricular series too. Active Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops were organized at the school in 1929. Two years later, a student council was initiated on the campus, charged with the responsibility of supervising student affairs.

In as much as many of the students at Seneca Indian School returned to a farming environment, Kagey undertook an extensive 4-H program for the school. With the deep interest and encouragement of Mr. H. A. Andrews, long time Superintendent of the Quapaw Agency at Miami, a dairy herd of forty purebred Holsteins was purchased, along with a new dairy barn and milking machine. Valuable training was provided the student body in animal husbandry, and too, the herd supplied enough milk for a quart per day per pupil, as well as the cooking needs in the school cafeteria. A number of calves were fattened each year and slaughtered for beef. Herds of registered Hampshire hogs, flocks of leghorn chickens, and white Holland turkeys were developed too, furnishing meat, eggs, and valuable experience for the student body.⁹

It became traditional during the Kagey administration for Seneca School students to place high and win prizes at the Ottawa County Fair, and Chilocco Achievement Day contests in home economics, animal and poultry divisions, and farm machinery maintenance and operation.

In atheletic competition, Seneca School students excelled too. For many years, the Seneca boxing team ranked with the State's best, placing high or winning most local and regional tournaments. The school was involved in an interscholastic athletic program too, which included football, basketball, baseball, tennis, and track. Seneca School teams played senior high schools and held their own although the institution was rated as a junior high with its nine grades. The highlight of the athletic year was the Athletic Field Meet, held on the campus each year, and included all sorts of sports competition.

⁹ "Seneca Indian School," *loc. cit.*, 23-24.

Seneca Indian School has a deep spiritual tradition. The institution's religious ties were not neglected during Kagey's administration. Through the years, the children continued to attend religious services at the Quaker Mission in Wyandotte on Sunday morning. Also, the resident pastor from Wyandotte came onto the campus each Wednesday and Sunday evening to conduct special services for the student body in the school gym.

Involved in such an extensive program of administration, Joe Kagey had little time to indulge his special gifts of painting and music in a formal way through teaching. His deep sense of the beautiful was not completely neglected, however, for with Mrs. Kagey, herself keenly aesthetic, he planned and constructed a spacious, native-stone home on a hill overlooking the school campus. Into its large rooms the Kageys placed, in a most tasteful fashion, antiques they had spent a lifetime in collecting. Elegant china and mahogany sideboards transport one into the middle of the eighteenth century.

The Kageys retired from the Indian Service in late 1956. Mr. Kagey was awarded the Department of the Interior Meritorious Service Award; Mrs. Kagey the Commandable Service Award.¹⁰ Less than three years later, on March 16, 1959, Joe Kagey passed away. The product of his nearly fifty years of service on behalf of the American Indian is epitomized in the funeral oration of Dr. Harry Curtis:¹¹

"Joe Kagey was revered by hundreds of Indians for the paternal interest he took in their affairs while they were students at Seneca School . . . and after they left the school. Many, who entered the school as orphans, came to regard the principal as their foster father."

¹⁰ *Seneca News Dispatch*, May 16, 1957.

¹¹ Manuscript of the Joe Kagey Funeral Oration by Dr. Harry Curtis, Miami, Oklahoma, March 19, 1959. Kagey Collection, Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library.