

THE INDIAN MISSION CONFERENCE OF OKLAHOMA

*By Martha Stewart**

Work among the Indians before the removal of the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, was nothing new to the Methodist Church, for many years before removal there had been faithful missionaries in the East. Many of these workers came west with their Indian friends to help them in any way possible on the journey.¹

At the close of twelve years of work in the Indian Territory the Methodist Episcopal Church consisted of 12 white preachers who were members of the Arkansas Conference; 3 Indian preachers, members of the same conference, and 21 local Indian preachers, among them Samuel Checote, a Creek. There were 1,500 Cherokee members, one thousand Choctaws, and 600 Creek members. Also 150 Negro members and 100 White members making a total of 3,350.

Methodist mission work had been so successful that the General Conference, meeting in New York City, May 1844, authorized the organization of the Indian Mission Annual Conference. Boundary lines of the Conference were Montana, on the north; Rocky Mountains on the west; Arkansas and Missouri on the east, a part of East Texas and all of the present State of Oklahoma on the south.

Bishop Thomas A. Morris was in charge of organizing the Indian Mission Conference. It met at Riley's Chapel in the Cherokee Nation near Tahlequah, October 23, 1844. This was the first Annual Conference ever held in Oklahoma. Preachers who were charter members included Thomas B. Ruble, David Cummings, J. C. Berryman, Edward T. Peery, N. M. Talbot, W. H. Goode, Johnson Fields, Thomas Bertholf, James Essex, Samuel G. Patterson, John M. Steel, Erastus B. Duncan, Isaac F. Collings, William McIntosh, Learner B. Stateler. William

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¹ The first Protestant Church service was held in the Pecan Point Methodist Circuit by Rev. Wm. Stevenson, a Methodist preacher in the vicinity of present Harris, McCurtain County, in 1818. This was an early white settlement on Red River within the limits of Arkansas Territory. A marker for Pecan Point was erected in 1962 by the Oklahoma Methodist Historical Society, under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society. Regular mission work among the Choctaws in this area was begun in 1831.

Oakchiah, and John F. Boot. Another member, William H. Goode was elected secretary.²

This was during the critical days just prior to the Civil War and that same year the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into two churches: The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. This division lasted until Union of the three branches of Methodist, which included the Methodist Protestant Church, in 1939.

The Indian Mission Conference in a resolution deplored the division between the North and the South, but moved to become a part of the Southern branch of the Church. Delegates were elected to a convention in Louisville, Kentucky, in May, 1845. This group voted to have its first General Conference in Petersburg, Virginia, in May, 1846. At the time of organization there were 27 local preachers, 85 white members, 133 Negro members and 2,992 Indian members in the Conference. During the year \$217.31 had been collected locally for missions. There were now about 90,000 Indians in the Territory with some 75,000 belonging to the Five Civilized Tribes.³

The second Annual Conference met at the Indian Manual Labor School in the Shawnee Nation, in Kansas, October 23, 1845. Bishop Joshua Soule presided and James Wheeler was secretary.

The third Indian Mission Conference met at Riley's Chapel in the Cherokee Nation, November 12, 1846.⁴ This Conference adopted sixteen rules to govern parliamentary procedure, which remained in force until 1930, when a special committee on rules submitted to the conference a new list, which was adopted.

The Church now (1846) had mission schools at Quapaw, Fort Coffee, Fort Washita. The Indian Manual Labor School was located at Shevano in Kansas. In 1843 a school for girls was opened at New Hope near Fort Coffee, Choctaw Nation.⁵

² The Reverend William H. Goode was the author of *Outposts of Zion* (Cincinnati, 1863), which gives a fine history of the Methodist mission work among the Choctaws and Chickasaws before the Civil War. Notes from *Outposts of Zion* have been used in the preparation of this article in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*.

The Oklahoma Methodist Historical Society erected an historical marker for the site of Riley's Chapel, commemorating the organization of the Indian Mission Conference in 1844. This marker is one mile south of the south edge of Tahlequah, roadside type with the inscription and erection under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society, in 1959.

³ Paul D. Mitchell; *From Teepees to Towers*, (Oklahoma City University Press, 1957), pp. 12-15.

⁴ Site of Riley's Chapel, see "Historic Sites in the Tahlequah and Park Hill Area," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1959), pp. 360-63.

⁵ Henry C. Benson, *Life Among the Choctaws*, (Cincinnati, 1860).

A school in the Creek Nation was started near present Eufaula, in 1848, called the Asbury Manual Labor School. This was the largest school in Indian Mission Conference. Choctaw Academy located near present Rufe, McCurtain County, was opened in 1849 but it did not rank as high as the others in the beginning.⁶

Progress in the Creek Nation was the most striking since the Creeks had long been hostile to Christianity. For awhile, only James Essex and Samuel Checote (both Creeks) were the only ones who dared preach in the Creek Nation. Eventually through the influence of Samuel Checote the laws prohibiting preaching by the missionaries were abrogated, and a whole district was formed in that nation. The Presiding Elder, Reverend E. B. Duncan, reported twelve churches and fifty new members added during the year.

In 1852 a school was organized in the Chickasaw Nation called Bloomfield Academy, near Achille, Bryan County.

It is interesting to note that the Tenth Conference met at the Creek Agency near the present site of Muskogee, on October 26, 1853, where not long before the preaching of the Word was forbidden under penalty of at least thirty-nine lashes or even death.

In 1854, William H. Goode, a Methodist Missionary visited Fort Gibson. He said: "the sight is beautiful and commanding. It has a general aspect of neatness and the officers live in good style but religious conditions are far from flattering. Intemperance is one of the greatest curses."⁷

In 1856, Mrs. George B. Hester, came at the age of eighteen years of age from her home in Alabama to teach in the Chicka-

⁶ This Choctaw Indian church is still called "Choctaw Academy," in the Southeast District of the Indian Mission Conference, McCurtain County. The Methodist school established here and opened in 1849 was named after the famous "Choctaw Academy" at Blue Springs, Kentucky, regularly opened for Choctaw Indian boys in 1825, and closed by 1848 because of academies founded for boys (and some for girls) in the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory. The Choctaw Academy Church has been reported as one of the most active of its Indian membership in the Methodist Mission Conference but few, if any, have known of the origin of the name of this church. The Choctaw Academy, Kentucky, while opened for Choctaw students in 1825 under the sponsorship of Hon. Richard M. Johnson, member of Congress, was operated under the management of the Baptists. The work of the school had begun as a mission for a few Indian pupils as early as 1819 through the Elk River Association (Baptist) in Kentucky. (For history of Indian education in Kentucky from 1825, see Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "The Choctaw Academy," in *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vols. VI, IX, and X.)—Ed.

⁷ William B. Morrison; *Military Posts and Camps in Oklahoma*, (Harlow Publishing Company, Oklahoma City), P. 39.

saw Mission near Tishomingo. She organized the first Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, South in Oklahoma at Boggy Depot.⁸

Two other workers who later came made a great impact on the work. They were sisters from Alabama, Misses Dora and Lochie Rankin who came to teach in New Hope. They stayed only one year. Miss Dora returned home and Miss Lochie became the first missionary to China in the former Southern Methodist Church sent out by the women.

The Civil War days brought disruption among the people of the Indian Territory and in the Indian Mission Conference. The Indian Nations were aligned by treaty with the Confederate States at the beginning of the War but the People themselves were divided in their sympathies. No church conferences were held in 1862 and 1863, and there was no regular lay representation until 1866.

Since the Indian Nations considered that they had aligned with the Confederacy, they reserved the right to surrender their own troops at the end of the Civil War, it was not until three months after Lee's surrender that the last Indian regiment surrendered.

The Church had a great task after the war in reorganizing and rebuilding churches and schools. Its influence was directed to re-establish law and help in allaying tribal feuds. The tribal governments under the supervision of the National Government and the national life of the Indians diminished. Chickasaw Academy, Fort Coffee and New Hope were not able to open immediately after the War though New Hope was opened later as a girls' seminary.

Soon after the War, the Reverend John Harrell was appointed Superintendent of the entire Mission. He gave most of his time to the Cherokee and Creek Districts.

Only brief mention can be given here from among the conferences year by year and many of the important events in history up to the work of the present day Indian Mission Conference.

The Twenty-sixth Conference was held at Boggy Depot, Choctaw Nation, October 4, 1871 with Bishop H. N. McTyeire, presiding. John Harrell was secretary. The meeting reported 127 White Members, 4,320 Indian Members, 434 Negroes, and 61 local preachers in the Conference.

⁸ Elizabeth Fulton was born in Georgia (1839), the daughter of Rev. Defau Tallerand Fukton from Virginia—see "Sarah Ann Harlan: Memoirs," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3 (Autumn, 1961), p. 310.

In 1885 Bishop Galloway presided over the Conference at Vinita, asking for volunteers to go to the "Wild Tribes" of the West or the Plains Indians. Reverend J. J. Methvin volunteered for this work. He gave many years of devoted service and was a loved member of the Indian Mission and Oklahoma Conferences until his death in 1941 at the age of ninety-three years. Among his converts were some of Custer's Indian Scouts, and such leaders as Kicking Bird, Andele and Hunting Horse. Hunting Horse, who lived to be 101 years old has two sons who are retired members of the Indian Mission Conference, Albert and Cecil Horse and one grandson who is an active member of the Conference. He is John Tsatoke ("Horse") pastor of Mount Scott-Comanche Methodist Church.

Andele, a Mexican, was captured as a baby by a wandering group of Kiowas, and reared by them as a son. Recognized in young manhood and restored to his family he could not endure the ways of his own people and returned to the Kiowas. He later became a Methodist preacher under the name of Andres Martinez.

The Indian Mission Conference today is the largest Home Mission Project in the Methodist Church. There are now 123 churches covering the state of Oklahoma with all pastors of Indian blood. Because of the need to follow our people wherever they are, the Conference has established Missions in Dallas, Texas; Arkansas City, Wichita, Topeka, Horton and Lawrence in Kansas. There are now over 10,000 members in the Indian Mission Conference.

In 1918, with Bishop Edwin Mouzon presiding the name was changed to the Oklahoma Conference since there were now more White members and the Indian Mission was organized as a Mission Conference.

It has been estimated that of the Indian population (123,000) in Oklahoma the Methodist Church reaches almost half that number. One in sixteen Indians is enrolled in a Methodist Church but many more look to it for help.

The Conference, covering the entire state of Oklahoma as well as the churches mentioned in other states is divided into four districts, Northeast, Southeast, Northwest and Southwestern Districts, each with an Indian District Superintendent.

The General Superintendent is the Reverend D. D. Etchison, a member of the Oklahoma Conference; Executive Secretary of the Conference Board of Education is the Reverend S. Frank Wheeler, who is also a member of the Oklahoma Conference. Director of Youth Work is a Kiowa Indian, the Reverend Robert Pinezaddleby, the only Seminary trained minister in the Mission and a member of the Indian Mission and Oklahoma Conferences.

Two are working under the Woman's Division of the Christian Service of the Methodist Church in the Indian Mission Conference. They are Miss Martha Stewart, former Conference Director of Children's Work, and presently working with the Cheyenne-Arapahoe Churches; and Miss Jeanne Conover, present Director of Children's Work for the Conference, formerly Church and Community Worker in the North Mississippi Conference.

At present there is one young minister in one of the new seminaries in Kansas City, St. Paul's Methodist. He will soon be graduating and returning for work with his people. Another graduated last June.

The Conference is well organized with a strong Woman's Society of Christian Service; a Methodist Youth Fellowship and a growing Young Adult group.

The American Indian influence is seen in the Conference by the names of some of the pastors and churches; Ahpeatone, Deer, Tecumseh, Roughface, Wildcat, are only a few of the surnames. Some of the churches are: Thlopthlocco, Antlers, Cedar Creek, Big Cussetah, Hunting Horse, and Mulkahay.

The Indian Mission Conference is a family affair. The whole family attends the meetings. While the pastors are having their meeting the women and youth are having their business meetings and activities are provided for the children. Inside the brush arbor during the Conference meetings ministerial and lay delegates are being led in prayer by one of the older ministers, one of whom is Reverend Frank Bosin, 101 year old Kiowa Chief. Outside, shielded from the hot sun by a tent, a grandmother plays with a little boy. The child is a great-grandson of Hunting Horse the famous U. S. Army Scout.

The Conference, guided by Bishop W. Angie Smith, hears reports of Methodism's growth throughout the Mission area. Occasionally, on invitation, one tribe or another sings in its own native tongue. Or it may present a gift to some visitor.

The greater part of the program is given over to Worship and important Conference business. This blend of the old and the new takes place each summer. They usually meet at one of the District Centers. This summer it will be at the Southeast District Center near Antlers. If you do not know the way, just go to Antlers and follow the Indians! Most of them will be going to Conference.

A visitor could easily mistake the Conference for a Camp Meeting in the best Methodist tradition. Dotted about the grounds are Camp-houses where the churches of the district

serve three meals a day to all visitors. Each table seats twenty people, usually two tables to a house, and these tables are filled three and four times a meal, in each house and sometimes more, depending on the number of people attending the conference. On Conference Sunday, when appointments are read there will be from four to five thousand people on the grounds.

Indian Methodists thoroughly enjoy their Conference because they like to do things as a family. And most of the parents arrange to take vacations at this time so they will not miss this great event, which has become so meaningful to them through the years.

Today, one of our greatest needs is for more workers who understand the Indian and his problems. Someone who can appreciate his culture and his ability.

The need is also for greater opportunity for training and education for our young ministers and others interested in church work. Also for unfailing friendship, wise counsel, and guidance, all vital phases of Christian service to the "first families" of the land.

The hand of Christian fellowship must be extended to him wherever he is. We need to recruit more young people to take their places of leadership in their own conference; to help open doors of opportunity for them, to encourage them in their ambition to help their own people, and most of all to talk with them in the spirit of Christian brotherhood.