

## PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARIES AND MISSION CHURCHES AMONG THE CHOCTAW AND CHICKASAW INDIANS, 1832-1865

By *William L. Heimstra\**

### *Introduction*

Presbyterian missionary activity among the Choctaw Indians was begun in 1818 under the sponsorship of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Cyrus Kingsbury and Cyrus Byington were pioneer Presbyterian missionaries among the Choctaws in Mississippi. Both of these men, born and reared in New England, served the Choctaw Indians first in Mississippi and later in the Indian Territory.

The missionaries established several schools among the Choctaws. The churches erected among the Choctaws did not thrive as well as the schools. A distinct improvement was evident in the year 1828.<sup>1</sup> In 1830 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions reported nine stations with over three hundred Indian church members. There were also seven schools with a total of approximately two hundred fifty students.<sup>2</sup>

A permanent work among the Chickasaw Indians was begun by the Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1820. The Chickasaw mission was transferred on December 17, 1827, to the supervision of the American Board, under whose administration the Presbyterians continued to serve the Chickasaws.

Missionary activity among the Choctaws and Chickasaws in Mississippi was terminated because the Indians were moved to lands west of the Mississippi river. By 1834 the majority of the Choctaws had left for the West; the Chickasaws came west and settled in the Choctaw country in the fall and winter of 1837-38. The stations among the people of the two tribes in Mississippi were abandoned in 1834.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterian Missions in the Southern United States* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1934), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1850*, Volume III, *The Congregationalists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 54.

## MISSION STATIONS

The first churches among the Choctaws in the Indian Territory were organized in 1832.<sup>3</sup> Schools were established and operated in conjunction with some of the mission stations.<sup>4</sup>

Members of the missionary families formed the nucleus of most new congregations. The congregational records listed negroes or "colored members" separately, whereas the Indian membership was included with that of the white. Of the 1578 members reported by the Reverend John Edwards to Dr. J. Leighton Wilson of the Presbyterian Board on March 21, 1860, there were 111 colored members. The Pine Ridge church, served by Dr. Cyrus Kingsbury, listed fifty members and twenty-eight colored members.<sup>5</sup>

The churches were scattered over a wide area of territory. Many of the churches consisted of as many as eight preaching places.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Alexander Reid of Spencer Academy wrote:<sup>7</sup>

The members are scattered over a circuit of more than twenty miles. The nearest members live two miles from us and from that distance they are scattered to fifteen or twenty miles. The nearest preaching places are three and a half miles and the most distant where we try to keep up meetings at all are six miles.

The scattered churches meant long trips on horseback for the missionaries. Charles J. Hotchkin, son of the Reverend Ebenezer Hotchkin, said, "I heard my mother say she would cook corn bread on Monday morning for my father and he would leave with others on ministerial tours and live on that bread for two weeks at a time."<sup>8</sup>

The missionaries profited from the services of native helpers. Douglas H. Cooper, agent for the Choctaws, reported that "ruling elders conduct meetings on the Sabbath, and at funerals in different neighborhoods."<sup>9</sup> Native leaders in the mission churches were required to give evidence of sufficient knowledge and proper piety before they were permitted to function as native helpers. Ministerial students were regularly taken under the care of presbytery and aided in their studies. After careful preparation, aspiring native preachers

<sup>3</sup> Presbyterian Indian Mission Correspondence and Reports, Box 12, Volume I, p. 248. The Presbyterian Historical Society of Philadelphia, Pa., possesses an extensive file of unpublished manuscript reports from Presbyterian missionaries serving various Indian tribes. The file contains reports from 1835-1890. The writer used files dealing with the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians. For the sake of convenience this source will be cited: Mission Reports, Box number, volume, and page.

<sup>4</sup> The various missionaries who supervised schools reported to the Indian agent concerning their work. This information was transmitted by the Indian agent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The Commissioner's annual reports provide valuable data on mission activity. This source will be cited: *Indian Affairs*, year, and page.

<sup>5</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1855, p. 152.

were licensed to preach.<sup>10</sup> Some attended college and seminary outside the Indian Territory.<sup>11</sup> This practice led to certain complications. One of the older missionaries referred to the Reverend Allen Wright, a native minister educated in New York, as a Choctaw young man who had become accustomed to a style of living in New York which could not be maintained in the Indian Territory.<sup>12</sup>

The native evangelists and helpers shared the extremely weighty responsibility of the missionary who supervised the activities of as many as nine preaching places. For this reason, the missionary at Wheelock could write that ". . . . in the absence of the pastor, the religious exercises are conducted by the licentiates and elders of the church."<sup>13</sup>

Services of worship were conducted at most of the churches regularly every Sunday. The Reverend John Edwards, pastor of the Wheelock congregation, reported in 1846 that "at five of these [nine preaching] places public worship is kept up statedly on the Sabbath, and occasionally at the others."<sup>14</sup>

Most of the missionaries were able to preach in the Choctaw and Chickasaw languages. This was particularly true of the pioneers Byington and Kingsbury. Those missionaries who could not speak the native language used interpreters until they acquired some proficiency in the use of Choctaw and Chickasaw.

Attendance at the church services was good. The Reverend O. P. Stark, pastor of the Good Land Church with a communicant church membership of 240, reported that ". . . . on ordinary Sabbaths our congregation numbers from 100 to 150 and 200. On communion Sabbaths our house is always crowded and in the summer time we meet outdoors, for want of room."<sup>15</sup>

Although the Presbyterian missionaries were not negligent in their efforts to indoctrinate the church membership, their reports reveal a distinct bias toward an evangelistic emphasis. Additions to the church membership afforded them the greatest joy. Special services, called protracted meetings, were held annually in an effort to gain converts.<sup>16</sup> The Reverend S. L. Hobbs gives a typical report on the results of the protracted meeting. He reports that there was ". . . . ample proof of warm hearts and streaming eyes. Eight were received to the communicant membership of our church, six by pro-

<sup>10</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1846, p. 348.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 124. (For further references see, John Bartlett Meserve, "Chief Allen Wright," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XIX, No. 4 (December, 1941), pp. 314-21.—Ed.)

<sup>13</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1846, p. 348.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>15</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

fession and two by letter. Thirteen manifested their wish and determination to be the Lord's. Six of these thirteen and five of the eight received were heads of families.'<sup>17</sup>

Thursday evening "lectures" were held whenever possible, and not infrequently other week-night meetings were crowded into a busy week. Prayer services were also an integral part of ecclesiastical life.<sup>18</sup>

Funerals constantly presented the missionaries with preaching opportunities. If it were possible, the funeral service would be held on a Friday, a temperance meeting on Saturday, and regular preaching services on Sunday. Funeral services would attract large crowds who would constitute an appreciative audience for three successive days and for many hours of those days. These series of services, occasioned by the funeral, were called the "big meeting."<sup>19</sup>

Offerings were received at stated times, not only to defray local expenses, but also for benevolent purposes. Gifts were not large at any time, and after the drought years of 1854 and 1855,<sup>20</sup> each gift represented considerable sacrifice. The Reverend Ebenezer Hotchkin was pleased to report that from the small church of 82 communicants at Living Land seventy dollars had been contributed to the cause of Foreign Missions. He estimated that the clothing worn by those present at the service could not be valued at more than three hundred seventy-five dollars. He adds, "one woman put in a dollar who had neither stockings nor shoes."<sup>21</sup>

Negroes also contributed to the work of the church. Mr. Kingsbury wrote, "I have paid Mr. Reid thirteen dollars from the colored people of Pine Ridge Church, Indian Presbytery, towards the salary of Uncle Simon."<sup>22</sup>

#### TEMPERANCE

The missionary reports are striking in that they reveal much of the "temperance crusader" in each mission worker. Everyone at the mission stations seemed to be self-conscious about the use, possession, or acquisition of alcohol in any form. I. W. Sterling, who served the Mission for a brief time as physician, wrote the Reverend Walter Lowrie of New York a labored explanation of his request for five gallons of alcohol. He reasoned:<sup>23</sup>

I am opposed to the use of all alcoholic tinctures, yet they may be administered in very minute doses without creating a morbid appetite for

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1855, p. 151.

<sup>21</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Mission Reports, Box 9, II, p. 696.

ardent spirits. And inasmuch as Alcohol will be required in case of injuries and in the preparation of Liniments, I have directed a larger quantity than it might be deemed prudent to send out.

The government agents shared the loathsome feeling toward intoxicating beverages held by the missionaries because of the baneful effects upon the Indians. Murders were frequent, and were chiefly attributable to drunken brawls. In a small locality ten of thirty-seven deaths which occurred in one year were of a violent nature.<sup>24</sup>

In his report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Indian Agent A. M. Upshaw said, ". . . it is with great pleasure and gratification that I can say to you, that I have not seen a single Chickasaw drunk this year; but regret that I cannot say the same for some of the white men in their nation."<sup>25</sup> Agent Upshaw made the above statement in order to impress the Commissioner with the great value of the missionaries.

In addition to the example of white traders in the Nation, white men in Texas and Arkansas operated "grog shops" for the convenience of the Indians who were subject to a rigid prohibition law within the Choctaw Nation. Cyrus Byington says, "On the Arkansas line there are many whiskey shops; wounds, poverty, and death are among the evils they generate."<sup>26</sup> Those who opposed drunkenness were always quick to realize that there was at least one compensating factor committant with a disastrous seasonal drought. The Indian Agent wrote in 1855: "The border grog shops, in consequence of low water, have not had their customary supply of whiskey. Drunkenness and murder have, therefore, been less frequent along the 'line.'"<sup>27</sup>

Whiskey shops could not operate in the Indian Territory because of governmental and local regulation. The Choctaw Prohibition Act of the Choctaw Nation West was passed in October, 1834.<sup>28</sup> The pioneer Cyrus Byington spoke words of highest commendation for the Choctaw Council when he wrote: "The Choctaw people deserve credit for what they have been doing during a whole generation in the cause of temperance. Their laws on this subject date long before those of the State of Maine."<sup>29</sup>

The missionaries fought a constant battle against drunkenness by encouraging total abstinence. The "temperance meeting" was the missionaries' chief weapon in the fight. The temperance forums were usually conducted after a funeral service, or on Friday or Saturday.<sup>30</sup> The threat of excommunication was a deterrent for the potentially

<sup>24</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 248.

<sup>25</sup> *The Constitution and Laws of the Choctaw Nation* (Pub. 1852), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1859, p. 560.

<sup>27</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1855, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1847, p. 764.

<sup>29</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1855, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 96.

intemperate wayward. In cases of persistent drunkenness, coupled with an unrepentant spirit, excision from the church was the last resort in the effort to curb the erring. Nevertheless, no cases were regarded as hopeless. In some cases, the excommunicated were again received into the church membership. The individual was required to show genuine repentance by circumspect living for a stated time prior to readmission into the fellowship of the church. The Reverend S. L. Hobbs was encouraged because he could report: "Last week a young man who was excommunicated three years ago told me he had been praying some time past and should be glad to be received back to the church again; for more than a year he has been constantly at our weekly prayer meeting when the weather was not stormy, although he lives eight miles off."<sup>31</sup>

#### TRANSLATIONS

Several missionaries of unusual talent were active in the work of translation. Dr. Cyrus Byington was a remarkable scholar and recognized philologist. He was graduated from Andover Theological Seminary in 1819. During 1820 he became a missionary to the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Dr. Byington's Choctaw grammar and Choctaw dictionary were works of permanent value. His Choctaw dictionary is *Bulletin 46* of the Bureau of American Ethnology. His Choctaw grammar is given in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*.<sup>32</sup> Byington also published a Choctaw Definer and Gallaudet's Sacred Biography Abridged, as far as through the life of Moses. He also wrote "questions on the Gospels of Mark and Luke with brief explanations of difficult passages."<sup>33</sup>

The Second Book of Kings was translated into the Choctaw language and published by the American Bible Society in 1855. On May 24, 1861 the Reverend John Edwards reported, "I am hard at work on the Psalms with Mr. Dukes."<sup>34</sup> During 1846 the "four Gospels in Choctaw were prepared for the press by the Reverend Alfred Wright."<sup>35</sup> In 1848 the entire New Testament was printed in Choctaw. In the same year a "Choctaw Spelling Book and a Choctaw Hymn Book were published in Boston."<sup>36</sup>

The translators spent much time and labor in performing this difficult though important work. The missionaries believed that if a strong native church were ever to be acquired, the Bible had to be made available to the Indians in their own language.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Hough, "Cyrus Byington," *Dictionary of American Biography*, III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. 380, 381. The grammar is given in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. XII (1871), pp. 317-67.

<sup>33</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1852, p. 414.

<sup>34</sup> *Mission Reports*, Box 12, I, p. 280.

<sup>35</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1846, p. 356.

<sup>36</sup> *Indian Affairs*, 1849, p. 1115.

## DIFFICULTIES

The hardships which the missionaries encountered were numerous. Their continued isolation did not mitigate periodic spells of loneliness. The missionary stationed at Lenox wrote on May 18, 1860, concerning his wife's loneliness, "There is no white lady within thirty miles, consequently she does not see a white woman very often. The last time was September last."<sup>37</sup>

Because the Indian missions were at such a great distance from cities and towns the missionaries ordered most of their supplies through the New York City office of the Presbyterian Board. Orders were placed for such varied commodities as sewing needles, sheet music for the "melodean", and umbrellas.<sup>38</sup> This mail-order service was not always satisfactory. George Ainslie, who had placed an order for an umbrella, received one of the most expensive and elaborate. He reminded the Board Secretary that ". . . an umbrella of the most common description is all I can afford to use here in the woods, where it is in danger of being 'snagged' every half-mile."<sup>39</sup>

Also because of the great distance separating the missionaries from the home office there were occasional misunderstandings. The men on the field found it difficult to understand what they regarded as laxity on the part of the New York office in not reenforcing the missionary personnel. Dr. Alexander Reid of Spencer Academy did not bother with diplomacy when he said, "At two of our old stations no meetings are held. The state of the church will be no better until you send a man to take care of it and restore the waste places."<sup>40</sup> About two months later the irascible Scot again reprimanded his superiors for their apparent failure to act upon his advice. Dr. Reid wrote to New York:<sup>41</sup>

The ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper have not been administered among our people for eight or nine months and will not be by me for nine months to come. I shall make a statement of the condition of the Church to the Presbytery and leave it in their hands as you direct, and the Presbytery and the Committee conjointly can, as they say in Scotland, make a kirk or a mill of it as may seem to them best. I shall not lift a finger or stir a foot in the matter. Outside of Spencer yard I have no call to work. My mind was made up four years ago not to remain in charge of Spencer unless a pastor was provided for the church and I see no reason to change.

Internal rifts among the personnel occasionally disturbed the mission stations and somewhat affected the progress of the missionary endeavor. Dr. Reid objected to the presence of the Reverend H. A.

<sup>37</sup> Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Wentz who was subsequently discovered to be a Northern abolitionist with a trunk of revolvers cached in his room.<sup>42</sup>

The missionary reports are replete with references to sickness. Most of the members of the mission families were frequently afflicted with "chills and fevers".<sup>43</sup> The Indian country never escaped the dreaded typhoid fever. Neither whites nor Indians were immune to measles. A typical condition of sickness is narrated by Cyrus Kingsbury on October 23, 1860: "Mr. Copeland's family are visited with distressing sickness. His wife is very ill, one of the children has been very low, and the teacher he had engaged for his school had been near to death, and was not out of danger, when last heard from."<sup>44</sup>

The missionaries were obliged to perform many unusual duties. During years of famine they assumed the role of food administrators.<sup>45</sup> Starving Indians came to the mission stations begging for bread.<sup>46</sup> With or without the aid of a medical handbook they served as physicians.<sup>47</sup> Alexander Reid was obviously proud to report that ". . . . On March 28th Mrs. Lee presented her husband with a fine boy. It was my privilege to officiate on this interesting occasion in the double character of Doctor-nurse."<sup>48</sup>

In order that a missionary might serve acceptably it was desirable that he be an agricultural-mechanical economist as well as an ordained minister of the Gospel. Cloth to be used in the manufacture of clothing had to be purchased in quantity at bargain prices. Grain had to be purchased at a favorable market price.<sup>49</sup>

The missionaries were not excused from performing secular labor. During the days preceding the Civil War this condition was accentuated. Even a callous reader would be moved to sincere sympathy for the aged scholar Cyrus Byington who wrote in April, 1861, "I need not go into all the details of my secular labours and the cares that come upon me. It must be that you have heard such things long enough."<sup>50</sup>

The work that was begun in the West in 1832 made steady progress. By 1860 the entire program of missionary activity had

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

achieved its greatest success.<sup>51</sup> War and its consequences destroyed much of that which had been acquired through persistent missionary effort during three decades. Only a seriously weakened mission survived in 1865.

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<sup>51</sup>The discontinuance of mission work in the Indian Territory in 1860, including that in the Choctaw Nation, by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (Presbyterian-Congregational) was the first blow suffered in this field, followed by the outbreak of the War between the States a year later. For reference to the post-war period see Natalie Morrison Denison, "Missions and Missionaries of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., Among the Choctaws—1866-1907," *The Chronicles*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4 (Winter, 1946-1947), pp. 426-48.—Ed.