

Indian Territory Stamp A Masonic Memorial

By JOHN A. MIRT



It may come as a surprise to many collectors that the Indian Territory stamp (No. 972) has hidden behind it a story of Freemasonry at work.

Issued in 1948, the stamp commemorates the 100th anniversary of the arrival in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) of the five Civilized Indian Tribes—the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Muskogees and Seminoles. That migration was made possible because the principles of Freemasonry prevailed when differences of opinion existed.

I found the beginning of this story in a history of the Prince of Wales Lodge No. 259, London, instituted in 1787. It reports that Gen. William A. Bowles, a white chief of the Creek Nation, was admitted as an honorary member of the Lodge and "was received with the unanimous applause of the whole Lodge."

After another visit to England in 1790 he returned again to command the tribe. He also carried with him the appointment by the Grand Lodge of England as Provincial Grand Master of Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians, so that he could introduce Freemasonry among the Indians.

The spirit of the Craft was to gain such a firm foothold among the Indian tribes in the first half of the 19th century that its force for good was to be demonstrated at a time when this nation was faced with a crisis.

The scene shifts to a history of Federal Lodge No. 1, Washington, which reports that on April 25, 1848, William P. Ross, chief of the Cherokees, was raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason. The history continues:

"He and other headmen of the Cherokee Nation were at the capital to arrange a treaty made necessary by the late enforced removal of the tribe from Georgia to the Indian Territory. These headmen were arrayed in two hostile factions, and the negotiations were at a standstill.

"But at one of the meetings of Federal Lodge, the rival leaders, all Freemasons, were brought together by the exertions of Worshipful Master S. Yorke AtLee and other members, and the treaty was then unsuccessfully concluded."

Ross was chief of the Cherokees for 40 years and on his death in 1866 he was buried with Masonic rites.

The story switches to the proceedings of the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire for 1848. Bro. Okah Tubbe, an Indian of the Choctaw tribe, was a visitor at the annual meeting. He addressed the Grand Lodge. This was followed by a discussion of plans for the establishment of Masonic lodges of "red men" of the various tribes in Indian Territory.

Six years later, the Grand Master of Georgia presented Col. Peter P. Pitchlynn, a chief of the Choctaws, to the Grand Lodge. Bro. Pitchlynn gave a

favorable account of the condition of the Craft in his tribe.

Then, in 1856, the Grand Master of Arkansas, speaking before his Grand Lodge, said:

"Among our red Brethren in the Indian Territory the Order is taking deep hold, and now embraces a goodly number of lodges and brethren. The members of these lodges compare very favorably with their paleface neighbors. In fact, it is reported of them that they exemplify **practically** the Masonic teachings and ritual by living in the constant discharge of those charities and moral virtues so forcibly inculcated in our lectures."

In 1868, when a further treaty between the government and the five Indian tribes was negotiated, the leading spirits in the delegation of Indians were Masons.

In the years to follow, some of these "red men" were to attain the highest honor Symbolic Masonry had to offer—Grand Mastership. Some were to rise to leadership in state affairs, others to important positions in national activities.

The seed for all this, sown when this nation was in swaddling clothes, sprouted and grew into a living and lasting thing under the beneficent Light of Freemasonry.

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