

Integrated Services ensures Nation events go smoothly



This article is part of the continuing series, *Enduring Legacies*, where we reflect on the history of each division of our executive branch of government: Legal & Compliance, Strategic Development, Commerce,

Integrated Services, and Tribal Services. While our needs today differ from the past, these services have deep roots in our Choctaw history. This month's article focuses on Choctaw Nation's Division of Integrated Services.

Every first weekend of September, Choctaw citizens and members of the general public converge on the grounds of the Choctaw Nation Capitol at Tvshka Homma for the annual Labor Day Festival. It is one of the best times of the year that showcases all that Choctaw Nation has to offer its citizens and non-citizens alike. But to pull together the weekend's offerings of member services, cultural activities, stickball tournament, softball games, arts and crafts show, carnival, and concerts (among many other events!) over the course of four days requires concerted coordination. Behind the scenes, the Division of Integrated Services' various departments help put on the biggest event on every Choctaw calendar. Together, the departments of Communications, Construction, Facilities Maintenance, Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, Marketing, and Procurement provide what SEO Kelly McKaughan describes as "operational, administrative and/or technical support for all the divisions of the Choctaw Nation." As they do with the annual Festival, Integrated Services works with every single Choctaw Nation government department to make sure it operates as one coordinated team to provide necessary services to its citizens and community partners. Without this teamwork, Choctaws would not have been able to come as far as we have today.

Prior to European settler arrival in the Americas, Choctaw society was divided into two *iksa*, or social groups that anthropologists call "moieties." According to Choctaw laws governing the *iksa* system, a Choctaw person had to marry outside of their *iksa*. This ensured that both *iksa* were represented in each Choctaw community and household. Having each *iksa* in every household helped maintain balance throughout Choctaw society. *Iksa* were part of the system of Choctaw life philosophies that emphasized balance in every part of Choctaw society. Balance, as a guiding philosophy of Choctaw life, was also an important idea that was integrated into Choctaws' most important ceremony – the Green Corn Ceremony.

While the ceremony itself is sacred, the following is a description that helps us understand its significance and see how Choctaws have honored it throughout our history, especially as we continue to deal with the negative consequences of colonialism. The Green Corn Ceremony was an annual renewal ceremony where Choctaws gathered together to resolve issues and start the new year in a good way. This was the most important social and spiritual event for Choctaws and other Indigenous peoples from what is now called the Southeastern United States. The ceremony requires people to work together to accomplish the necessary tasks to prepare for the new year. Without Choctaws' emphasis on working together to achieve balance, we would not have been able to maintain our ways and sovereignty throughout time and survive until the present.

Nevertheless, because colonialism and Euro-American ways of thinking devalued Choctaw philosophies and government, Choctaws had to adapt to the U.S. government's suppression of Indigenous ceremonies. When the U.S. government removed us from our homelands to Indian Territory by the Trail of Tears, it was catastrophic for our ceremonies. Many elders who had knowledge of our ceremonies died during removal. When they arrived in Indian Territory, things were not as prepared as the U.S. government said it would be and many Choctaws did not have all the supplies they needed to build a new life in a new land. This led some to set aside ceremonies. Others practiced ceremonies in secret or practiced with other Indigenous nations who performed a Green Corn Ceremony. Despite these changes caused by colonialism resulting in the decline of this important renewal ceremony among Oklahoma Choctaws, the Choctaw calendar and the gathering of Choctaw people at the beginning of the new year remained important to our people – which we now see in the present.

In May 1938, the Choctaw Tribal Council House at Tvshka Homma reopened after a series of renovations. Originally built in 1884, the Council House hosted annual meetings for all Choctaw people to attend in addition to serving as a meeting place for Tribal Council. The day

before the 1938 re-dedication celebration, the McAlester News Capital ran an article announcing the event and declared that it was expected to be the “largest gathering of Choctaws that had taken place in many years.” It included an address by Chief William A. Durant. The event was so successful that it became an annual reunion organized by a group called the Choctaw Educational Iksa. Their mission was to “promote the interest and ambition of all those who wish to assist their neighbors in growing into the kind of citizens that make the state and nation a worthwhile place in which to live.” We believe this reunion might be an early version of our Labor Day Festival.

Similar to today, the reunion featured a pageant, stickball games, and speeches on Choctaw history. The reunion ended with a barbeque and picnic on council grounds. By gathering all Choctaws together, the reunion became a way for the principal chief to get input from all citizens to plan the future of the Nation.

Today Choctaws carry on this reunion and its tradition of communication at our Labor Day Festival. Every Labor Day, Choctaws gather at Tvshka Homma and spend the weekend taking part in Choctaw culture and history with one another, and Chief delivers his State of the Nation address. While the Green Corn Ceremony among Oklahoma Choctaws has become limited to certain communities, the time of year is still important for us as a people. While Choctaw government does not manage the Green Corn Ceremony officially, Choctaws use the end of the harvest season to gather together and share information about the past year, our history and our ways of life. As Integrated Services’ Executive Director of Communications Dara McCoy reminds us, “We have to understand our sovereignty can always be under attack.” This shows us the importance of educating people about Choctaw Nation and our ways of life. Whether through billboard campaigns along highways or articles in the Biskinik, Communications is part of the Integrated Services team that educates Choctaws and the wider public about who we are as a people, so we can better assert our sovereignty as a nation.

During our current Labor Day Festival, with the support of the Division of Integrated Services to make sure the weekend is publicized and runs smoothly, the Choctaw Nation carries on the social spirit of the Green Corn Ceremony by bringing our Choctaw family all together, so we can work collectively to chart our path forward. If Choctaws did not come together as we have done for centuries, we would not be where we are today. All parts of the Choctaw Nation contribute to our mission of ensuring that our ways of life not only survive but more importantly, thrive.

In the upcoming articles, we will reflect more on the ways the Divisions of Choctaw Nation’s Executive Branch carry on ancient and important functions to the benefit of our community today. For more information, please contact Megan Baker at 580-924-8280 ext. 2377 or meganb@choctawnation.com. To read more on the Green Corn Ceremony or other past issues of Iti Fabvssa, visit <http://choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>