



By JOSEPH WOLF
Contributing Writer

We can gain much wisdom when we visit with elders. Lessons on life are deeply imbedded in the oral histories they offer and the documents they leave behind. On May 23, 2016, two staff members from the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department went to visit with a Choctaw elder, Joan Cooper, in Poteau, Oklahoma, to speak about her Choctaw family stories. Ms. Cooper, who is half Choctaw, grew up around Heavener most of her life (her great grandfather founded Heavener) and told us stories about her great-great-grandfather Rev. Willis Folsom who lived near Pocola, Oklahoma. Rev. Willis Folsom was a Methodist Minister who preached sermons and interpreted Choctaw, alongside other missionaries and ministers.

Rev. Willis Folsom was born (1825) in Mississippi, the son of McKee and Eumertachre Folsom. As a young child, Rev. Folsom moved along with his parents to the new land as of then, the Indian Territory, Choctaw Nation (I.T., C.N.), now present day, Oklahoma. Throughout the years, Rev. Folsom resided in or near Pocola, C.N. just a couple of miles north of Backbone Mountain. Around 1851, Rev. Folsom became an ordained minister and was licensed to preach. He preached the Gospel throughout the Choctaw Nation and Chickasaw Nation. His diary begins Aug. 11, 1856, with solemn dedication to the Lord.

Rev. Folsom writes: "I do hereby most solemnly consecrate myself to my Heavenly Father to seek a blessing of a clean heart, holiness of heart, without which no man shall see the Lord. I do sincerely forsake all my sins and do heartily repent and bewail my manifold transgressions. O my God, cleanse me from all inward sin by the application of the blood of the Lamb! My Lord, grant it. Amen."

For the next several years, he seems to have been employed as interpreter for the missionaries and traveled far and wide through his nation and often into other tribes. There were times Rev. Folsom did not get to preach and this upset him greatly; we learn of his struggle through his diary. In one of his entries, Folsom shared:

"January 22nd 1860: Did not preach today. Went to New Hope, but was not invited to preach; so I went to Fort Coffee thinking they would invite me to preach, but was not invited. I felt very bad to have traveled twenty-eight miles and back and not get to preach." Folsom faced devastating and tough times during his ministering the Gospel. These included discovery of the loss of his child as he returned home from preaching one evening, and the destruction of his house in 1861, burned by Confederate soldiers who also drove away his stocks, but he did not give up. He shares a struggle with us: "Horse strayed or stolen; so I walked to Short Mountain and back, twenty-two miles, to my appointment. Six joined the church. Warm time." Years go by. The year 1885 finds Rev. Folsom as busy as ever, traveling widely, preaching, interpreting and exhorting, with seldom more than a day at home. On Aug. 28, he returned home from a long absence to find his wife very sick and we learn of her death three days later on Aug. 31, 1885.

Folsom shared:

"Wife went away this morning. We have been together in many trials for a long time. O my God, Help me to bear patiently all thy doings. On September 5th, this day Brother Shappard preached my wife's funeral." After the death of his wife, Rev. Folsom kept on preaching far and wide, but on Oct. 28, 1894, we read the last entry. It is written in a strong, firm, clear hand.

Folsom wrote: "New Hope, Sunday night, Matthew XI 28-30. Had much liberty; nine came for prayer; two converted; been happy all day." Of going through some tough times in his life, Folsom never gave up preaching the Gospel to the Choctaw and Chickasaw people; Rev. Folsom did God's work. We can learn a great lesson of perseverance. In the year of 1897, Rev. Willis Folsom passed from his life in Skullyville, C.N. and was laid to rest near his home in Pocola, C.N. We acknowledge Rev. Folsom as one of the greatest ministers, interpreters, and leaders within the Choctaw Nation. Ms. Cooper shared with us some great, phenomenal stories about her great great grandfather Rev. Willis Folsom at her home in Poteau, Oklahoma. If you are in the area, we encourage you to visit Rev. Folsom's historical marker, located just three miles south of Pocola, Oklahoma, on the Y of Hwy 112 and Love Street, and the oldest church in Pocola (continue on Love St. going straight south from the Y, go a couple of miles down, on the right corner is the Methodist Church where Rev. Willis Folsom preached).

This visit was part of the Historic Preservation Department's continued efforts to collect Choctaw History through oral stories and documents. As the new Community Liaison, I think tribal members play a vital role in our mission to preserve this important history. If you would like for me to come and meet with you so you can share your Choctaw stories of places, family, sites, historical events, and figures, etc., I will be more than glad to sit with you. I want to hear your side of history! Yakoke!

The new Community Liaison, Joseph Wolf, can be reached at 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2559.