

Charles McGilberry: The Triumph of a Choctaw Spirit

Earlier this month two staff members from the Historic Preservation Department had the honor of being asked to travel to Pennsylvania to speak at a celebration commemorating the 100 year anniversary of a young Oklahoma Choctaw man's graduation from that elite institution.

The event and the preparations for it, made us aware of an incredible Choctaw story, which we had not heard before. We'd like to share it with our readers.

Imayachi, "In the Race," was a Choctaw boy born at Boggy Depot in 1893. He came into a harsh world.

Sixty years after the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the federal government was attempting to terminate the sovereignty of the Choctaw Nation, to destroy the Choctaw community, and once again, take Choctaw lands.

Imayachi was known in English as "Charles McGilberry," or simply as "Charlie." In his first years of life Charlie knew little of the 400-year-long story of colonization, but he experienced firsthand its cruel affects.

The McGilberry family moved to the San Bois mountains in Charlie's infancy. Tragedy soon struck, taking the life of Charlie's mother before he was two.

This left Charlie's father, and three young children on their own, doing the back breaking work of subsistence farming. Before he was six years old, Charlie was accustomed to rising at 4 a.m. to begin helping his father work on the farm to provide food for the family.

Charlie's father remarried, but under great economic hardship. It was not possible for the couple to care for their five children. The family was broken apart when two of Charlie's siblings went to live as laborers on the farm of their relative Chief Green McCurtain.

The family was further separated in 1899 when Charlie was taken to the Jones Academy Boarding School. Tragedy struck again when in 1902 Charlie's father was wrongfully convicted of murder in a Euro-American court, simply because he was Choctaw.

He was imprisoned in Leavenworth, Kansas. Wrongfully imprisoned, constantly harassed for being Native American, and not allowed to write letters to his son Charlie in their native tongue, Mr. McGilberry one day had more than he could bear and beat one of his tormentors to the ground, breaking his nose.

This earned him solitary confinement and the nickname "Crazy Injun," but no one picked any more fights with him.

Jones Academy was a Choctaw-run boarding school. Although a far better place than the federal boarding schools, even here young children received little affection, hard manual labor, and harsh physical punishment for minor infractions.

Charlie was left with nothing but his father's occasional letters from Leavenworth written in broken English and his strong faith. Rather than become bitter or lose hope, he grasped onto the promise given in Romans 8:28; "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Young Charlie put all of his energy into learning what the school had to teach him. He was by no means trying to give up his Choctaw identity, but rather trying to understand the Euro-American's knowledge and way of thinking in order to empower himself and the broader Native American community to rise above the inequities they faced in a colonized world.

Charlie completed his studies at Jones Academy with honors. This allowed him to continue on to high school at Chilocco Boarding School.

To get to the school up near the Kansas border, Charlie took his first train ride. Chilocco had a military feel. The boys were outfitted with military-style uniforms and divided into companies and platoons.

In this environment, Charlie was exposed to a number of different tribal cultures among his classmates. He earned the respect and friendship of some of his traditional peers when he charmed a bird from a nearby tree to alight on his outstretched hand.

At the same time, he impressed the school faculty with his abilities in writing, debate, and on the football field.

Charlie came to believe that his calling in life was to go on to college and return as a teacher. He worked even harder to get the grades to earn entry into college.

This determined effort caught the attention of the Chilocco superintendent, who recommended Charlie for a special new program. Mercersburg Academy, an elite prep school in Pennsylvania, was looking for three exceptional Native American students to enroll. Upon graduation, they would have the opportunity to attend Princeton University, expenses paid.

Charlie was one of the three from around the country who were accepted. Unknown to them, they were part of a racial experiment conducted by a wealthy benefactor and the school to see if Native Americans were intelligent enough to hold their own academically with the most privileged of Euro-American society.

Almost 1,300 miles from home, Charlie began his time at Mercersburg as a second-class human, constantly ridiculed by his classmates because of his Choctaw heritage.

His positive attitude and his determination to take every opportunity to grow soon brought him success even in this environment.

Charlie excelled academically, in debate, and in writing for the school paper. As a senior, a serious bout with diabetes kept him in the infirmary for months.

After his condition was diagnosed and his health returned, Charlie put together an almost super-human effort to catch back up in his studies in time for graduation.

Mercersburg required its students to participate in sports and early on Charlie had chosen football.

However, as a Native American, he was not given a real chance to play. For three years, he served as the most energetic cheerleader from the bench.

Finally, in 1917, his senior year, Charlie was allowed to play. That year, the Mercersburg team went undefeated until the final game.

In the waning seconds, Mercersburg found itself on defense in a tie game.

As the opposing team's ball carrier was running in the backfield, there was suddenly a vicious "crack" as one of the two Native American players on the Mercersburg team collided with him and dislodged the football into the Mercersburg end zone.

Out of nowhere, a Choctaw streak, Charlie, darted around the other players and recovered the ball.

The two Native American players, who had not even been allowed to play until their senior years, had preserved the school's undefeated season.

Of the three Native American students originally enrolled at Mercersburg, only Charlie was able to graduate.

This earned him the opportunity to continue on to Princeton. He would never make it. His plans were interrupted by World War I and his subsequent marriage.

Charlie and his wife, Vivian, a Chickasaw, attended East Central Teacher's College in Ada, Oklahoma.

Charlie went on to receive a master's degree from the University of Oklahoma and did his graduate work at Columbia College.

His years of work in school allowed him to reach his calling—a career in teaching young people in tribal schools, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, and rural schools in Oklahoma.

In getting to know the story of Imayachi and walking in some of the same places that he did, beyond anything else what impresses this writer is this young man's strength of spirit.

Living in a world where he and other Choctaw youth faced so much adversity, Imayachi relied upon his faith to rise above the situation that he was born into.

He worked hard to realize his full potential. He kept his faith and hope even when he was in very dark places.

Through his career, he contributed to the lives of generations of young Native American students. Imayachi, Mr. McGilberry, thank you for the example you have given to us.

The account above is excerpted from the book "Touched by Greatness," by S. Wayne and Carolee Maxwell.

The Historic Preservation Department is grateful to Wayne and Carolee, Charles McGilberry's granddaughter, for making us aware of his story.



from "Touched by Greatness" by S. Wayne and Carolee Maxwell

Despite the hardships in his life Imayachi, or Charles McGilberry, went on to teach generations of Native American youth. He found his calling as a teacher in high school while at Chilocco Boarding School near the Kansas border.