



On a walk, night has fallen . . .

. . . the moon peeks through the forest as you walk, lighting your way. Off in the distance you hear it, at first very faint, then louder as it moves closer. The haunting call of an owl. Within seconds, it swoops over your head and lands on the fence post along your path, turning its head to look at you. Does your heart skip a beat? Are you filled with dread? If so, you are not alone. For many Choctaws, seeing an owl is a clear omen of an imminent family related illness, accident, or something far worse. For the month of October, Iti Fabvssa will explore the legend surrounding owls.

Judy tells of a young girl, a resident of Carter Seminary. She awoke in such a fright that the night staff were unable to console her. Through her sobs she wanted nothing more than to call home. When Judy asked the staff what was happening the staff let her know that the young girl had had a bad dream and wanted to call home. Of course they denied her this request; it was 2 a.m. Judy inquired about the young girl's dream. When she learned it was of an owl, she immediately chastised the staff members and allowed the young girl to call home. Her uncle had just died.

Judy's story is not unique. Many families have stories of owls and their ominous warnings of death in the family, whether extended or close. According to missionary accounts, owl stories were prevalent in our homeland as well, including one of the Choctaw ishkitini, or the horned owl. (Swanson 2011:199) It was believed it prowled at night killing men and animals. If it

screeched, it meant this death was sudden, as with a murder. If the ofunlo, or screech owl, was heard it signified a young child under seven in the family would die very soon given the owl itself was small in size. If the opa, or common owl, perched on trees near the home and hooted, then this was an ominous warning of death among close relatives.

“If my grandma heard a screech owl, she would just tremble in fear!”

Mary Sockey travelled the Trail of Tears with her siblings and parents. Her mother, sister, and she were among the only survivors of her family. Having lost relatives as young as two years old in Mississippi, and then young siblings during removal, she was well aware of the pain in losing small children. It is no wonder she held an intense fear of screech owls. But why an owl? Why is the owl the messenger of such bad news?

Joseph recounted a story of his youth, north of Madill. Elders sat on the porch at night. They saw in the distance an owl. It flew closer and landed near them. Each time they tried to scare it, it would fly away only to return and land in the exact same spot. It was a different looking owl, much too tall and bulky. It would flutter its wings and appear to dance before them. One of the elders went into the house, grabbed his gun, and returned to the porch to shoot it. It was shot in the leg and flew away. The next day, one of the elders reported to the others that a local witch or Indian doctor was in the hospital with a leg amputation.

Olin remembered, this owl was different. We hired an Indian doctor to assess the situation during the day time and he found the owl to be an Indian doctor who wished to harm a family member. He offered us a solution to get rid of it. We crushed red bricks and replaced the pellets with brick dust in our shells. When we fired them off at the owl, the red dust scared it away.

Stories like these tell of great witches, or hatukchaya, that can transform themselves into owls. Once the hatakchaya is an owl, they use their medicine on unsuspecting people. For this reason, people have grown fearful of owls and want to avoid interaction with them because their presence is a warning of bad things to come. Traditionally, we consulted the village Indian doctor, or alikchi, to determine if an owl was a hatukchaya. We took their suggestions to counteract the upcoming disaster. Over time people noticed strange human-like characteristics of hatukchaya owls that made them easier to differentiate between regular owls: their deep throated or unusual hoot, their ability to laugh, their tall stature or roundness like a man, even their ability to dance, walk, jump, and move like a human. Despite this, people remain suspicious of all owls.

Olin offered this story. Down in Mississippi, my mother was scared. Very scared because of two owls that would land on the clothesline, swoop down and walk around on the ground every evening. Over and over like a nightly ritual. I prayed with her. Then watched it happen again through the dining room window. Same thing, then they flew off. I went outside thinking there was something that was attracting these owls. Then I smelled the smell, was there a gas leak? I called the gas company and they found a gas leak. While the man was fixing the leak, I asked him if the owls would be attracted to the smell. He told me they would be but also the change in the air. With the leak the air was heavier and they could see it when evening came. It had nothing to do with the superstition at all; it was science.

Our stories, including our legend, are passed down from generation to generation. A rich oral tradition could explain why we believe in the ominous warnings of owls or their true identity as witches. The next time you see an owl, where will your mind take you?