Book offers insightful and impassioned view of Chilocco

They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School by K. Tsiitna Lomawaima, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, 202 pages

When Muscogee citizen Curtis Carr entered Chilocco Indian School as a nine-year-old boy in 1927, he probably never imagined that his daughter would later write an award-winning history of the school.

Carr's experiences figure prominently in They Called It Prairie Light by K. Tsiitna Lomawaima, a professor of American Indian studies at the University of Arizona. Her book was the winner of the 1993 North American Indian Book Award.

Muskokane authors have made a good impression on the judges for this important literary prize. Since the annual competition began in 1991, two of the seven recipients have been Muskokee citizens. Vincent Mendoza won the award in 1995 for his autobiography Son of Two Bloods (featured in the May 1997 issue of The Muskokee Nation News).

Chilocco Indian School, located on Cherokee land south of Aransas City, Kan., opened for students in 1884. It was one of the first off-reservation schools established by the U.S. government, marking the beginning of a new era in the effort to break up tribal communities and assimilate Indian children to Anglo-American life. The allotment of tribal lands and Oklahoma statehood were just around the corner.

The book's title refers to the first building constructed on the campus, an imposing limestone edifice nicknamed "the light on the prairie."

More buildings followed and attendance grew during the first five decades of Chilocco's life. Annual enrollment reached 800 by the early 1930s and soared from this level up to 1,200 through the 50s. Students were recruited from tribal communities throughout the continental U.S. and Alaska. Muskokee and Yuchi began attending Chilocco after 1910 and for many years remained one of the largest tribal delegations at the school.

Until reforms were introduced in the 30s, students were subjected to an intense regimen of academic and vocational education as well as strenuous work detail, with discipline modeled after military traditions. Enrollment declined after World War II as federal policy shifted to supporting day schools and public schools closer to tribal families. Chilocco Indian School closed in 1980.

The author provides a brief overview of Chilocco's history, then focuses on the period between 1920 and 1940, the heyday of the off-reservation boarding school system.

Lomawaima conducted interviews with 53 Chilocco alumni and several former employees who were at the school during these years. She calls these survivors' "living archives," their recollections are the basis for her book. This oral history approach is one of the real strengths of Lomawaima's work.

Federal policy and administrative practices created an institutional climate intended to control every aspect of the boarding school students. One of the most important features of school life was the segregation of students according to gender, with female students subjected to especially close supervision.

Lomawaima examines the educational and personal experiences of male and female students in two chapters organized by gender. Her analysis of Chilocco's