

Book offers insightful and impassioned view of Chilocco

They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School, K. Tsiainina Lomawaima, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, 205 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. Tsiainina Lomawaima, a professor of American Indian studies at the University of Arizona. Her book was the winner of the 1993 North American Indian Prose Award.

Mvskoke 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 Muscogee citizens. Vincent Mendoza won the award in 1995 for his autobiography *Son of Two Bloods* (featured in the May 1997 issue of *The Muscogee Nation News*).

Chilocco Indian School, located on Cherokee Outlet lands south of Arkansas 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 20s and varied from this level up to 1,200 through the 50s. Students were recruited from tribal communities throughout the continental U.S. and Alaska. Mvskokes and Yuchis 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 lives of 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

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Bruner, Tulsa, motioned to amend the resolution to omit naming tribal Tax Commissioner Michael Factor and alternate, Linda Lowe, as its representatives, specifically. The alternate was amended to be a designee of the tax commissioner and approved (21-0-1);

Abstaining was **Nichols**, Okmulgee;

• TR 95-17 — approving the addition of roads identified during phase I of the National Road Inventory Update Project to the current Bureau of Indian Affairs Reservation Road Inventory was approved unanimously (22-0) with amendments;

Lewis, Okmulgee, motioned to amend the inventory with the addition of Duck Creek, Okmulgee District, eight miles. It was amended unanimously by voice vote; and

• NCA 97-57 — a bill appropriating funds to Vernon Charitable Foundation Inc., toward the repair of a facility to be used for a community center, was not addressed, therefore remaining tabled. The bill was tabled in the May regular session.

Oct. 25 quarterly session

Absent was **Tiger**, Creek.

In Council business:

• approved unanimously (24-0) NCA 97-104 — amending 95-127 appropriating the principal chief to expend \$30,000 from the interest on the permanent fund account on social services for citizens residing outside of tribal boundaries. It provides for the carryover of unexpended funds into FY 98;

• approved unanimously (24-0) NCA 97-107 — authorizing the principal chief to execute an agreement with the City of Muskogee to settle pending legal actions and acquisition of lands to be placed in trust for the Nation;

• approved unanimously (24-0) NCA 97-108 — approving the Creek Nation Housing Authority five-year and one-year Indian Housing Plan as is required by the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1996;

• approved unanimously (24-0) NCA 97-109 —

"domestic training for girls" is particularly insightful and impassioned.

But the military life is only part of the story of Chilocco Indian School. Lomawaima shows how students also contributed to the creation of a unique "school culture" that allowed many of them to survive — and even thrive — in the harsh environment. How individual students responded to the boarding school experience depended on a wide range of factors including tribal affiliation, family background, and individual personality as well as their age when entering Chilocco and the historical period during which they attended.

When Lomawaima writes that "Chilocco was an Indian school," she means not only that it was a school intended for Indians, but also that Indian students found ways to make it their own. A concluding chapter on the "private moments" controlled by Chilocco students sheds light on how this took place.

repealing NCA 90-106, NCA 94-86, and NCA 96-13 and implementing a special academic-extra-curricular program. The three acts to be repealed authorized and appropriated funds and established guidelines for the special academic and extra-curricular programs. Because of budget restraints the two programs will be combined. It appropriated \$15,000 from the bingo revenue account to fund the program;

• NCA 97-111 — appropriating funds for the burial expenses of tribal citizen Ples Calvin Bridges Jr., of which the tribal children and family services administration had served as guardian at the time of his



photo by Stephanie Berryhill

Second Speaker Bill Fife, right, receives the oath of office from Muscogee Nation Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Wiley, center, after Justice Amos McNac, left, administers the Mvskoke language version of the oath.

death, was approved unanimously (24-0) with amendments;

• failed to approve (5-18-1) NCR 97-13 — confirming the principal chief's renomination of Mike McCoy to the gaming operations authority board. Voting no were: **Berryhill**, Wagoner-Rogers-Mayes; **Bruner**, Tulsa; **Chupco**, Muskogee; **R. Cleghorn**, Tulsa; **Ellis**, Okmulgee; **Gillespie**, Wagoner-Rogers-Mayes; **Hale**, Okmulgee; **Johnson**, Okfuskee; **Kelley**, Tulsa; **Lewis**, Okmulgee; **Little**, Muskogee; **A. McIntosh**, Okmulgee; **T. McIntosh**, McIntosh; **Nichols**, Okmulgee; **Pickering**, McIntosh; **Smith**, Okfuskee; **Watson**, Okfuskee; and **Wheeler**, Creek;

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Annual alumni gatherings that continue today are testimony to the enduring bonds of intertribal friendship and solidarity that many students formed decades ago.

Mvskoke and Yuchi students made up 12 percent of the student body in 1925 and 18 percent in 1939; Mvskoke and Yuchi narrators appear throughout the book.

Lomawaima includes detailed information about her interview methodology, making this a useful resource for anyone interested in conducting their own oral history project. A number of visual archival photographs add a visual dimension to this fine book.

They Called It Prairie Light is available from the University of Nebraska Press at: 901 N. 17th St, Lincoln, NE 68588-0520; or through a toll-free order line at 1 (800) 755-1105.

— James Treat, University of New Mexico