

ITI FABVSSA

The Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians

This month, Iti Fabvssa travels outside of Choctaw Country in order to present a story that forever intertwines the lives of several Choctaw individuals with other people from 52 Tribes across the United States. The Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians has been the subject of many articles through the years.

Located in southeastern South Dakota, the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians opened its doors in 1902. Through the first three decades of the 1900s, it housed roughly 75 inmates at a time, of both sexes.

We became aware that there is a Choctaw part in this story when we were contacted by a member of a northern Tribe, who gave us the name of a Choctaw person buried in the asylum's cemetery.

Beginning in 1988, a group of tribal people who have relatives buried in the cemetery began holding an annual memorial service on-site. Through the years, this memorial has brought together tribal people from across the country, connected to each other by their family members buried in the cemetery. The memorial is supported by the town, with community members participating, as a way of acknowledging something awful that happened before they were born, and of making positive relationships with tribal people today.

The asylum's history is an account of something terrible, but a counter story of resilience and perhaps, even of hope can be found.

Imagine, that government agents break into your house, kidnap you, incarcerate you in a dangerous facility located hundreds of miles away, and block all contact with your friends and family. As much as this sounds like the beginning of a fictional novel, for Native Americans living in the early 1900s, it was a real possibility. It may have happened because someone had a disagreement with the Indian agent or for many other reasons, and in some cases, it was because a person actually needed psychiatric care. Whatever the reason, during the opening decades of the last century, hundreds of Native American people were taken from their homes and incarcerated in the only mental health facility that has ever been created in this country for a specific "race."

Once inside this institution, most would never make it back home.

By the accounts of an outside medical investigator, the inmates in this asylum were treated worse than inmates in contemporary prisons. Family members' attempts to get their loved ones professionally evaluated and released were systematically thwarted. Inmates' letters to their friends and families were intercepted, or edited. Direct contact with family members was

forbidden. Although treatment for tuberculosis existed, it was denied to inmates at Hiawatha. The disease infected new victims in the institution, which had no running water or electricity. The average life span of an individual incarcerated at Hiawatha was only 42 years. When people died, they were buried in unmarked graves on the asylum grounds. The only record was a rough burial chart, written onto the wall of the superintendent's office.

From 1908-33, three separate government investigations recommended replacing the superintendent, or shutting the institution down altogether. The asylum closed in 1933. Upon evaluation by a trained doctor, a significant number of surviving inmates were deemed mentally healthy and sent back home. Those who really needed psychiatric care were transported to an institution in Washington, DC, which effectively removed them ever farther from their communities and families. Eventually, all of the buildings at the old Hiawatha Asylum were torn down. Today, the only visible reminder is the cemetery, which contains the unmarked graves of 180 Native American people who died at the institution.

Organizers of the memorial have reached out to 52 tribes including the Choctaw Nation to make us aware that we had tribal members who experienced this asylum from the inside. We only know the name of one young Choctaw woman, who must have been incarcerated shortly after the institution opened, and was buried in the cemetery in 1905. Subsequent research has revealed a 1926 article, in which a visitor describes meeting an unnamed Choctaw woman in the asylum that year, and indicates that other Choctaw people were at the asylum with her. Unfortunately, their names and stories are, at least for the moment, lost to the tribe.

If you know of a Choctaw person who was at the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians, in Canton, South Dakota, please contact the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department at 1-800-522-6170 ext 2216.

We want to hear your stories and begin to piece together this part of tribal history so that the memory of those Choctaw individuals who experienced the Hiawatha Asylum is not lost to time.