

Iti Fabussa

Issuba Vmbinili Tvshka: Choctaw Lighthorsemen

During this past annual Choctaw Labor Day festival you may have noticed the many men and women with our Choctaw Nation Public Safety Department directing traffic, working security, locating lost children, and providing the Tvshka Homma grounds with the overall presence of safekeeping.

The goal of Public Safety is to serve and protect, as well as to aid the community. Servant leadership through law enforcement is not a new concept, but has been passed down from the original Choctaw police, Choctaw Lighthorse.

In 1820 the Choctaw chiefs were forced into the Treaty of Doak's Stand. While having to cede more lands, the chiefs set aside funds to be used for the future. Some of these funds were used to create the Choctaw Lighthorse.

The Choctaw Lighthorse were a group of men given the responsibility of being the principle law enforcement in the Choctaw Nation.

Throughout the early 1800s Choctaw society began to change as it adapted to pressure from American settlers. Some of these pressures include intermarriage, schooling and education, interaction with missionaries, and reliance on Euro-American trade goods.

While against the law, traders were making their way into the Choctaw Nation and selling alcohol to the community.

By 1824, Peter Pitchlynn was made the head of the Lighthorse and tasked with the removal of whiskey from the Choctaw Nation.

By 1826, laws were created against the selling of liquor, theft, adultery, and murder. The punishment for breaking a law was 39 lashes.

Continued pressures from American settlers pushed the United States into passing the Indian Removal Act and forcing the Choctaw chiefs to sign the 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, leading to the removal of thousands of Choctaw people.

After the Choctaw people were removed to Indian Territory, the Choctaw leadership met in 1834 to create a new constitution. This constitution reestablished the laws created in Mississippi and raised the number of Lighthorsemen to 18, six elected for each district.

By 1860, additional laws were added for treason, arson, perjury, rape, murder, grand larceny, and kidnapping.

In 1866 the death penalty was changed from hanging to shot until dead.

The Lighthorse were selected due to their respect and involvement in the community. On a few accounts, some Lighthorsemen were not even Choctaw by blood, but they had married in and proved themselves members of the Choctaw community.

It was the duty of the Lighthorsemen to assist the community in times of need. During the American Civil War, renegades ravaged the Indian Territory, leading to the destruction of many parts of the Choctaw Nation. While many of the men were at war, the Lighthorsemen acted as home guards by protected the community and aiding families any way they could. The years following the Civil War were rough as some of the most notable stories about the Lighthorse come from this era.

The lighthorsemen travel light. They carried only essentials, and their Choctaw ponies were able to traverse rough terrain. They wore traditional clothing like turbans, leggings, moccasins, and breechcloths mixed with American shirts, hats, boots, and pants.

They carried traditional weapons like clubs, tomahawks, and bows, as well as flintlock or cap pistols and shotguns. A red ribbon attached to their hat signified their status as a Lighthorsemen; later, they carried badges similar to the U.S. Marshals.

Following the Civil War, after the Treaty of 1866, the U.S. Marshals were the only law enforcement agency who had jurisdiction to enter Choctaw lands to catch outlaws.

Many times, the Marshals would work with the Choctaw Lighthorse to capture non-Indian outlaws

fleeing justice within the Choctaw Nation and take them back to Fort Smith.

Please keep an eye out for the next two issues of the Iti Fabvssa. We will be presenting more on the subject of the Lighthorsemen.

If you are descended from a Lighthorsemen or know any stories of the Choctaw Lighthorse and want to share, please let us know.

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National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Peter Pitchlynn was made head of the Choctaw Lighthorsemen and tasked with removing whiskey from the Choctaw Nation. The Choctaw Lighthorsemen were the original Choctaw Tribal Police.



Photo courtesy of Leon Chase Phillips Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma

Pictured are a group of Choctaw Lighthorsemen. The Choctaw Lighthorsemen traveled light, carrying only essential items. Their Choctaw ponies were able to cover rough terrain. A red ribbon attached to their hat signified they were a Lighthorseman. Later, they would carry badges similar to the U.S. Marshals.