

## **The Modern Day Choctaw Lighthorsemen**

This month's issue of the Iti Fabvssa will finish up our series on the Issuba Vmbinili Tvshka, or the Choctaw Lighthorsemen. The October 2016 Iti Fabvssa was a brief overview of the Lighthorsemen, examining their foundation in Mississippi, their reestablishment in Indian Territory after the Trail of Tears, and their role in the Civil War.

Last month, in January, we looked at the gear they carried and their duties during daily life. This month we would like to focus on the latter years of the Lighthorsemen and how their spirit still exists today within our Choctaw Tribal Police.

The Choctaw Nation government in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) was established in 1834. As the Choctaw Nation began to grow, so did the responsibilities of law enforcement. Counties were established within each of the three districts, Apukshunnubbee, Moshulatubbee and Pushmataha. Each county had a court house as well as its own sheriff, who handled day-to-day affairs pertaining to the local people, and a ranger, who managed issues involving livestock and branding. With local law enforcement managed by the county, the Lighthorsemen's role moved toward acting as peace officers and messengers. Each district chief, as well as the principle chief was allowed to have up to six Lighthorsemen who could be used to assist the county sheriffs and rangers or for special assignments.

The county sheriff would call upon the district Lighthorsemen to assist with making arrests or carrying out sentences made by the Choctaw courts.

There are many stories passed down through families and recorded about the Choctaw Lighthorsemen, but one of the most famous is the execution of Silan Lewis known as the "Last Execution."

In 1894, Lewis was arrested and found guilty of killing Joe Hokolotubbee. As per Choctaw tradition, Lewis' execution was set several months in advance, allowing him time to return home to put his family's affairs in order.

This traditional Choctaw practice dates back before written records. If an individual was found guilty of taking another Choctaw life, then they were to be put to death. However before their execution they were allowed to return to their family and ensure the crops were planted and the harvest

secured before they made their appointment.

If they did not show for their execution, another family member would take their place. Lewis showed up to his appointed date in Wilburton and asked that his friend Sheriff Lyman Pusley do the execution.

This also followed a Choctaw tradition of asking a friend to do the execution, so no one would seek revenge. Pusley's shot missed Lewis' heart, so Pusley had to place a handkerchief over Lewis' mouth and suffocate him.

The story of Silan Lewis' execution is said to be the last execution ever carried out by the Choctaw Lighthorsemen, however there is another story of a Choctaw execution in 1899.

A Choctaw man named William Goings, also known as Walla Tonka, was a famous baseball player who had toured as far as England. According to one story, Goings killed his uncle over a disagreement about a woman he loved. The Choctaw courts found him guilty and sentenced him to death. His execution was scheduled for the following year.

Goings married and continued traveling the country, playing ball. On the agreed day, Goings traveled to the Alikchi Courthouse grounds for his execution. Several Lighthorsemen stood in a line and fired a volley to complete the sentence. Lewis and Goings may be the last executions carried out by Choctaw Lighthorsemen before the turn of the century.

In 1906, the United States Government dissolved the Choctaw Nation, as well as the Choctaw Lighthorsemen. Thereafter, the President of the United States chose the Principle Chief of the Choctaw Nation until the 1970s.

With the sovereignty of the Choctaw Nation stripped, the Federal Government's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) managed the Choctaw people. It was not until after the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act was passed in 1975 that Choctaw Nation was able to elect its leaders and to manage itself once again.

By 1979, the Tribal Council created the Constitution of the Choctaw Nation, reestablishing our own sovereign government. Within the next few decades, the Choctaw Nation began taking over BIA responsibilities, including law enforcement.

Again, the Choctaw Nation adopted its own policemen. With 39 officers, the Choctaw Tribal Police manage both investigation and patrol responsibilities of the tribe and have over 54 cross deputation agreements. The Tribe has a

Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officer, School Resource Officer, Tribal Court Officer, two K9 units, a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit, and a polygraph examiner.

Although our Choctaw Tribal Police no longer wear the red ribbon on their hats, as the Lighthorsemen of old, they do wear a badge of honor that instills in them the sacred duty of the Choctaw Lighthorsemen. Our Tribal Police work hard to ensure the protection of our tribal members, tribal employees, and the sovereignty of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

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

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by Choctaw Nation

**One of the most famous stories about the Choctaw Lighthorsemen is the execution of Silan Lewis, known as the “Last Execution.” Lewis asked his friend, Sheriff Lyman Pusley (*above*) to do the execution. This followed a Choctaw tradition of asking a friend to do the execution so no one would seek revenge.**



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**The Choctaw Lighthorsemen live on in the Choctaw Tribal Police, who are the modern day Lighthorsemen. While they wear badges instead of a red ribbon in their hat, the heart of the Lighthorsemen live on in the Tribal Police Officers. Just as their counterparts in the past, the Tribal Police keep the Choctaw Nation and Choctaw tribal members safe. They continue to patrol tribal land and assist local law enforcement as needed.**