

## CREEK INDIAN BURIAL CUSTOMS TODAY

By Mrs. Irwin A. Watson\*

Students are taught in their social study classes about the customs and traditions of the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, but are told very little about the Creek Indians who are their classmates and friends. Many people have lived for years, probably all of their lives in the Creek Nation but have very erroneous impressions of these citizens and the part they play in our complex civilization. Few know about their customs, traditions, and culture. As a matter of fact, many have never attended a Creek religious service or a funeral, and have not even seen a stomp dance or stick ball game. Many people pride themselves on knowing all about the past history of the Indians but know little about them as they are today.

The Creeks as a whole have no connected idea of their own history and the boys and girls have little idea of how social progress has surged against their beloved traditions and institutions. The Creeks, for the most part, have been assimilated into the American way of life, and many outstanding men and women continue to bring honor to their people.

The history of the Creeks since the Civil War has been almost a complete blank, for these people have been neglected by historians.<sup>1</sup> Journalists and travelers have written about other tribes of Indians but in the absence of convenient data, historians have overlooked the Creeks. The story of their life and customs has remained hidden

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I am indebted to the many Indian boys and girls whom I have taught and have learned to love. It is they who have given me the desire to record Indian customs so that they and their posterity may appreciate their heritage.—Mrs. Irwin A. Watson, Wetumka, Oklahoma.

<sup>1</sup>The most complete account of the history of the Creek Nation in the Indian Territory before 1907 is found in Angie Debo's interesting volume *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman, 1941). The Bureau of American Ethnology has published John R. Swanton's detailed studies of early Creek customs and social organization in several volumes: *Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors* (Bulletin 73), *The Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Bulletin 137), and "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy" in *42nd Annual Report*.—Ed.

in the tribal records, in newspapers published in the Creek Nation, the reports of their government agents, and in the memories of the older Indians. With the fading of these records and the passing of these aged Indians most of the traditions and customs of these people will be lost to posterity. This article is an attempt to record the traditional Creek Indian funeral as it is observed today.

When a Creek Indian passes away, the body is taken to the mortician and prepared for burial. The funeral is held three or four days after the death of the person. The body of a Christian Indian is usually taken to his church. As the hearse approaches the church, the bell is tolled and rings until the casket is placed in the building and the mourners are assembled for the first service of the funeral. Relatives and friends come from far and near and camp for the duration of the funeral. After the brief religious service is held at the church, the body is sometimes taken to the camp house where it lies in state for the period of two or three days until the evening before the funeral. The relatives and friends usually sit up at his camp house until midnight, each night preceding the final wake, and then sleep the remainder of the night on pallets on the floor around and under the coffin.

If the casket is not taken to the camp house, it lies in state at the church. Here the men and women sit up until midnight but at a late hour most of the women and children go to bed, while the men remain at the church all night. The deceased is never left alone from the time of death until the interment since an attendant remains near the casket at all times.

On the night before the funeral some churches still have an all night funeral wake which consists of a religious service that lasts until midnight, after which a supper for all present is held, and then another service continues till daybreak. The forenoon of the funeral day is taken up with religious services consisting of songs, prayer and scripture readings. A dinner is served at noon and the formal funeral service is held at 1:30 or 2:00 p.m.

The following is a description of a typical all night wake which was held at the Wetumka Indian Baptist Church which is located two miles south of Wetumka. This church was organized before the Civil War and is still functioning.

Since the weather was warm and a large crowd was expected, the funeral service was held in the big open air tabernacle adjoining the church. The pavilion is a commodious, electrically lighted addition having a concrete floor and home-made wooden benches which face a raised pulpit platform. The deceased was a returned soldier so the casket was covered with an American flag and was banked with beautiful floral pieces. A picture of the boy, in full army uniform, was on an easel near the head of the casket.

The all-night service was to have started at 8:00 p.m. but it was not until 8:45 that a deacon gave the signal assembling the services by blowing four loud mournful blasts on a cow's horn. This instrument is a kind of bugle with which hunters call their dogs.

The people began to come to the service from their cars and from the camp houses and tents around the church camp grounds. As the Indians met their friends, they greeted them with a hearty handshake as is their custom. They sat in small groups or stood about talking quietly and earnestly. Some of the older men and women sat all alone in quiet meditation. Five men with broom sticks in their hands acted as ushers and moved the people to places where they wanted them to sit. Their autocratic seating of the crowd was accomplished by gestures with the stick accompanied by facial contortions including the peculiarly Indian custom of "pointing with the lips." These ushers seated people in the front pews first, leaving the benches in the rear for late comers.

The best singers among the women who are known as "Leaders of the Church" sat at the right in front of the pulpit faced by the deacons and preachers who were to take the initiative in the service. The men were shown to places on one side of the building and the women were seated on the other. It is not customary in the Indian church for men and women to be seated together. This practice is seldom broken except in an instance as on the final day of the funeral when the family of the deceased is not separated.

There were enough little boys present to fill about three benches. These children seemed to enjoy their association throughout the entire evening for they quietly laughed and whispered among themselves. When they tired of the service, they got up and moved about. The boys often left the tabernacle to play a game of chase or to go to their camp house to get something to eat or to take a nap.

There was a bucket of drinking water hanging from a wire at the back of the shed. If anyone felt thirsty, he walked to the pail and took a drink from the dipper. The little girls were often sent to the bucket to get a drink for a mother or a small child. All of those present felt free to walk in and out or to move about as they desired. They often walked across the platform from which the minister preached.

The song service began at 8:50 p.m. and lasted for about thirty minutes. The man or woman designated to lead the hymn remained in his seat and started the melody. After he had sung a few notes, the congregation joined in with beautiful harmony. The pastor often designated a certain person to lead a song or prayer but if a member felt the urge to sing a favorite hymn or to offer a prayer, he did so and the congregation followed his lead. Some of the singers had strong, magnificent voices while others had soft sweet melodious ones. All of the voices blended in the lovely rendition of their native

Creek sacred songs. The music contained many beautiful harmonic and minor chords. Indians employ a different tone scale and rhythm pattern from the Europeans. They seem to sense a kinship with the deepest meaning of life. The music was very loud and fast, quite in contrast to European funeral strains. However, some other Indian denominations sing very soft slow funeral music which is more in keeping with the European style of a funeral dirge.

The hymns were interspersed with prayers which were all said in Creek and were entirely unintelligible to a person who did not know their language. Their supplication sounded somewhat like a chant with their rising and falling inflection and resonant cadence. The congregation joined audibly in the prayers. Their high and low voices made pleasing music which touched one's emotions.

A brother of the church made a brief talk in Creek, then read from the Bible in English and translated it into Creek. Then the clergyman preached the evening sermon in his native tongue. He talked without script or notes. He had impressive inflection and expression in his voice which made the sermon sound like the chant of an auctioneer. The only words that could be understood by the white visitors were the proper names. On that occasion, he used for his text the story about Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. He quite often repeated the same words and phrases for emphasis. He used many graceful gestures which made his hour's discourse very impressive. While the minister spoke some of the adults seemed tired and nodded. Several of the little boys gave up their play, lay down on the benches and went to sleep. Mothers came and went putting their children to bed on the pallets and beds in the various camp houses.

Just before the conclusion of the sermon, one of the deacons went across the platform on which the speaker stood, opened a door directly behind the pulpit, and procured a short bench and set it on the ground beside the shed. When the sermon was finished, the people began to sing and the usher placed the bench in the aisle near the casket. The preacher asked for sinners or backsliders to come and take a seat on the bench as an indication of their desire for the prayers of the congregation. No one presented himself; therefore, after the first song was finished, the usher removed the bench and other songs and prayers were entered into by all.

At 11:30 p. m. the service was concluded. At that late hour some little two and three-year-old children were still awake, going in and out of the tabernacle, eating candy, cookies or other food, while babies in arms were drinking from nursing bottles which were filled with "Koolaid" or coffee instead of the customary cow's milk or formula. The congregation quietly left the church. Some returned to their homes, a few went to their camps and prepared for bed, while others sat by the casket with members of the bereaved family in readiness for the early morning service.

After a short intermission, food was brought out and placed on the benches for all to partake of the midnight snack. Large kettles of boiling coffee were imbibed. This stimulant was drunk to help the worshippers stay awake till dawn. Sandwiches, cookies, doughnuts, potato chips and foods that were good with coffee were served.

After all had eaten and another intermission was observed, the religious service was resumed at 2:00 a. m. This service consisted of songs, prayers, and scripture readings. Those who had anything to say addressed the group. Each preacher present offered words of condolence. This program continued until dawn. The meeting was dismissed with a prayer and another intermission followed.

A short devotional was held for all campers in the church just before breakfast was served at about 8:00 a.m. All visitors were welcomed to the various camps to partake of a bountiful breakfast. The blessing is always said in every camp at each meal. Either a man or a woman is called upon to give thanks for the food, but if a preacher is at the table, he is expected to offer the prayer.

The forenoon service convened at 10:00 a.m. and lasted until 11:00 a.m. This program was very much like that of the evening service of the night before. It consisted of songs, prayers, scripture reading, and testimonials. The worshippers adjourned to prepare for the noon meal.

At 1:30 a.m., on the day of the funeral, a very long table was placed under the beautiful native oak and elm trees. This table was laden with many different kinds of delicious foods. Some were cooked and served in typical European style, while others were the traditional Indian dishes such as *sofkey*, *apuske*, "cold flour", and blue dumplings, or blue bread. Indian cooking has always been a highly specialized native art of which the Creeks have been justly proud. Corn was their staple article of food when the White men came to America and the natives still make many delicious dishes from the grain. The corn is beaten in a mortar (a log that has been hollowed out by fire) with a heavy topped wooden pestle, to a form of hominy grits or coarse corn meal. The husks are winnowed from the corn in a large shallow woven basket. The *sofkey* is made by cooking the beaten corn to a form of gruel thin enough to drink. A little "drip lye" is added to give the corn a yellow color and a distinctive flavor. "Drip lye" is made by pouring a little boiling water through clean ashes so that the lye drips out of the bottom of the ash container. The *sofkey* is set aside for two or three days till it reaches a stage of fermentation. Some people like the *sofkey* when it is fresh, while others desire the sour taste in the dish. The liquid is drunk for a beverage after which the corn is eaten with a spoon. Most Indians eat the dish without salt, while a few require the seasoning. Blue dumplings are made of the beaten corn and the burned shells of field peas. Small flat patties are made of the grain

and cooked in boiling water. The pea hulls give the dish a blue color. The apuske is a food drink made by stirring a meal made of parched corn into water, sweetened to taste and iced. The corn for this dish is used when it is at the firm roasting-ear stage and is parched in hot ashes. This drink is very refreshing and appetizing.

While the dinner was being served, a few members of the family and some of their friends sat in the church near the casket in a reverent attitude. These relatives relinquished their places of mourning to others while they ate their lunch. After everyone had partaken of the bountiful feast, the women cleared away the food which remained and washed the dishes. Each one put his property away in his own camp house. The men removed the table and replaced the benches in the building. Then everyone prepared for the afternoon service.

The casket, which had been taken into the church after midnight, was again moved to the open pavilion so that more friends could be seated in comfort for the funeral. The coffin was then more profusely banked with cut flowers and blooming plants.

At 11:30 a.m., on the day of the funeral, a very long table was people to make ready for the meeting. Fifteen minutes later, he blew the horn again for all to assemble for the funeral service. While the crowd was gathering a guest book was passed around for the signatures of those present. These pages were beautifully lettered since a majority of Indians are expert penmen. All who signed this register later received cards acknowledging their presence at the funeral. The ushers again seated those assembled by placing the bereaved family, men and women together, on the right side, near the casket. All of the other men and women were separated—the men on one side and the women on the other. Since the pews were crowded, the little boys sat on the ground beside the tabernacle. Chairs, benches and stools were brought from the camp houses and placed near the shed so that all could see and hear the service.

All present, even the babies, were very quiet. There was no whispering and all had very sober faces. The family and close friends seemed grief-stricken and many wept audibly. Since this was the funeral of an Indian soldier, the National Guard presented the colors and took their station as honor guards. After all were seated and everything was in readiness for the funeral, four long blasts were blown on the horn announcing the beginning of the service. The pianist played appropriate introductory music after which the minister made several announcements. He spoke in Creek first and then repeated his statements in English. A beautiful Creek funeral song was sung by all of the assembled Indians. The hymn was followed by a prayer in Creek by a member of the church. Several familiar funeral songs were sung in English by a choir of young Indians. The obituary was first read in Creek and later

interpreted in English. Then, as a special request, a young Indian man sang a Creek song which was the favorite of the deceased. The sermon was preached in English by the pastor. His text was: "If a man die, shall he live again?" He used no notes or script and delivered a scholarly sermon of great beauty and with extreme reverence. Then words of exhortation were uttered by a young Indian in his native tongue.

The casket was not opened but all reverently filed by to view the bier. All were again seated and the names of the pall-bearers and flower girls were announced. The colors were retired, and the people filed from the church. Most of them went to their cars and prepared to go to the cemetery.

The flag draped coffin was placed in the hearse and as the funeral procession started to move away, the large bell mounted on four tall poles in the church yard, was tolled, and could be heard as long as the cortege was leaving the church. The body was laid to rest in a community cemetery some ten miles from the church. Many other Indians had been buried there as could be seen by the wooden or concrete houses built over the grave as is the Indian custom.

National Guards were lined up at attention when the hearse accompanied by the relatives and friends arrived at the cemetery. The casket was placed over the grave, the guards fired the farewell salute and taps was sounded by the buglar. Contrary to the opinion held by many, that most Indians are stoic and show little or no feeling, much emotion was expressed at this funeral. As taps was being played, many wept audibly and one bereaved woman collapsed.

A Creek song was then sung, a prayer was uttered and the casket was lowered into the vault. A beautiful hand-made quilt was placed over the casket and the lid was then put on the vault. The grave was partially filled and the workmen stood aside for the time being and the two men took shovels of dirt and stood at either end of the grave. As the Indians sang, all who were friends of the deceased passed by the grave, took a handful of dirt and dropped it in the open pit. This ceremony signified their last handshake with the deceased. The grave was then filled, the flowers were placed on the newly made mound and the final prayer and song was sung and the mourners departed. Indians always observe the graveside rites of a prayer and song beside the open sepulcher and a prayer and song over the filled grave regardless of weather or time of day. They always accord this respect to their loved ones at their burial-places.

Some Indians today still practice burying food and other possessions in the casket. Quite often a nursing bottle and canned milk is placed in the coffin with a baby. Scissors, thread, needles, and a thimble are buried with a woman. Tobacco, food, clothing, and cherished possessions of the deceased are often buried with the

body or placed in the little house over the grave. Missionaries say that they have covered up in graves many hundreds of dollars worth of valuable blankets and shawls. Once a baby was buried in a buckskin dress which was adorned with five hundred dollars worth of elk teeth. The practice of taking food to the grave and leaving it was common among the Indians in the early days and is still practiced by some.

The friends of the family always dig the grave and Indians think it is indeed very unfortunate if it is necessary for the family to make the excavation and that it is disgraceful for the friends to allow the family to pay for the work.

Many modern Indians still build a covering, which they call a grave house, over the grave. The small house is a little larger than the grave and about two feet high, having a gabled roof. Some of the structures are wood and are covered with shingles, while some are of concrete and are flat on the top. Some families put tomb stones at the head and foot of the little house. Often the picture of the deceased is placed on the headstone.

If Herodotus had not recorded the deeds of the Greeks and Persians we would know nothing of the Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis. If someone does not write down the story of the social and cultural life of our own Creek Indians, this romantic heritage will be lost to posterity.