

★ NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The Journals of David Pendleton Oakerhater

*By Alvin O. Turner**

“We live by big water and sometimes get lots of big fish. We are learning to read and spell every day.”¹ That undated entry is the first found in six volumes of journals kept by David Pendleton Oakerhater from about 1875 to 1913. Oakerhater is known to history for his actions as a warrior, his ledger drawings, and his ministry to the Cheyenne people of Indian Territory. I (and other historians) have known of the journals for more than twenty years, but his descendants’ concerns about ensuring proper respect for them left them in family hands until they were recently donated to the Indian Archives of the Research Division at the Oklahoma Historical Society. The following notes are based on a preliminary examination of those journals.

The cited entry dates to the time Oakerhater was in prison at Fort Marion (Castillo San Marcos), Florida, one of about seventy-five Plains Indians who had been imprisoned in an effort to remove troublemakers from the tribes of western Oklahoma following the Red River War of 1874–75. At that time, he was known as Making Medicine, a rough translation of his Cheyenne name Okuhatuh, which also could have been translated as Sun Dancer.² That name reflected the respect he had gained as a warrior; another tradition names him as the youngest to participate in the Sun Dance.³

Once at Fort Marion, Oakerhater was known as a leader among the prisoners and as an eager student of the educational program provided by Captain Richard Pratt. He and other prisoners also gained recognition for their ledger drawings, which many art historians deem a major

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

List of Cheyenne & Arapaho Indians arrested @					
1875	Indian name	Indo-aptation	Age	Sex	Label
Apr 5		Drop of Rivers	49	MO	Clay
		Bear Shield	45	MO	"
	Mak-minie	Earless Head	50	MO	"
		Medicine Water	40	M	"
		Long Back	53	M	"
		White Man	44	M	"
		Rising Bull	30	M	"
	Cohoe	Baker Lay	44	M	"
		Brass Heart	26	M	"
		Star	29	M	"
		Howling Wolf	27	M	"
		Making Medicine	33	M	"
		Antelope	39	M	"
	Comer-up & val	Wolf's Marrow	44	M	"

List of prisoners at Fort Marion, Florida. Making Medicine, Oakerhater's name before being named David Pendleton, is listed twelfth from the top of this list (Cheyenne and Arapaho Agency Records, OHS).

step toward a distinctive American Indian art form. Following his conversion to the Episcopal faith, he completed training as a deacon and then returned in 1881 to the Cheyenne reservation in Indian Territory where he ministered until his death fifty years later. In 1986 the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States added his name to their calendar of saints, honoring that ministry and his faithfulness.

The first entry quoted was juxtaposed with words of a short prayer and a reference to a visit to the fort from Generals Nelson Miles and Philip Sheridan. The latter had been the author of the plan for imprisonment of the warriors. Oakerhater found them both "very nice men."⁴ There were no other notes from this time period or for about the next ten years. As most pages consist of brief, dated entries of usually not more than a few lines, this gap suggests that some of his journals may have been lost. Unfortunately, that includes those he may have kept during his time at Fort Marion, in training for the diaconate, and for the first years after he returned to the reservation. It is also possible, however, that some pages from those periods may be found among the materials on hand as there are many signatures from the volumes that have been separated from their original binding and interspersed among pages for divergent dates. Those physical characteristics also point to an intriguing possibility that pages from at least some of the

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

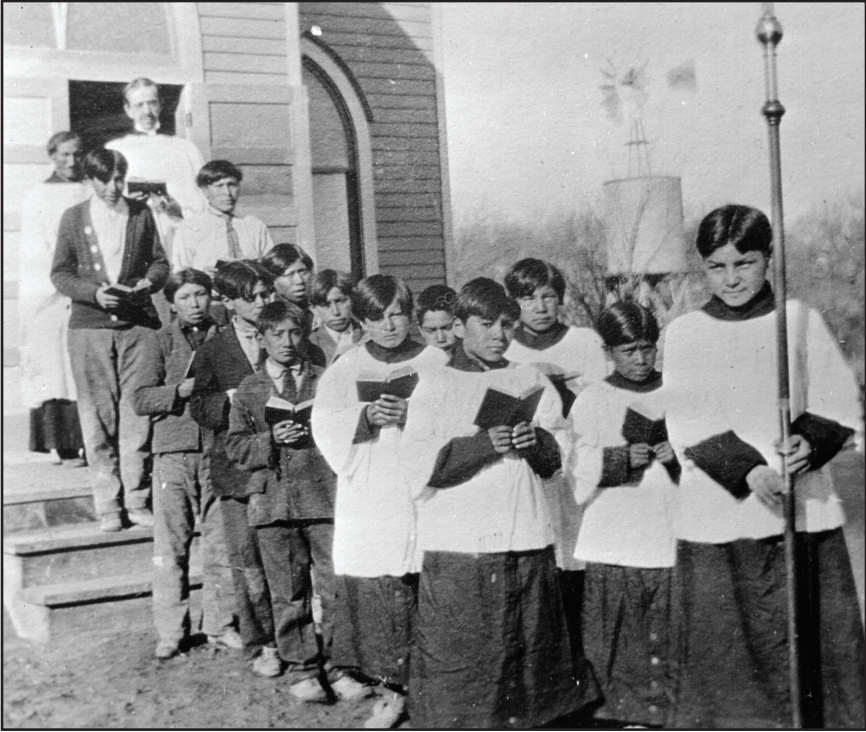


Left to right: Taaquawie (Comanche), Oakerhater (Cheyenne), Zotom (Kiowa), Okstei (Cheyenne) (OHS).

journals on hand could have been utilized for some of the drawings that he made while in captivity.

Oakerhater's comments about the two generals are important indicators of his identification with Pratt's program of acculturation. They also represent one of a very limited number of notes that give any sense of his thinking about individuals or topics. Significantly, the other major exception to that rule was a comment about how pleased he was to see cornfields around the Cheyenne agency creating a picture "like civilization."⁵ Otherwise the journals offer important contributions toward a picture of his daily life, his connections with individuals and groups, and understanding the nature of his ministry and continuity of his faith. They also provide an insight into his personal finances and the finances of Whirlwind Mission, and give two other pieces of information dealing with the question of his age.

Collectively the journals cover the period from 1885 to 1912. In 1884 J. B. Wicks, the New York priest who had trained Oakerhater and his Kiowa contemporary Paul Zotom and supervised their first three years of ministry in Indian Territory, left the mission to return to New York. The journals end about three years before Oakerhater's



Oakerhater pictured in clerical robes at the far left with choir boys in front, Anadarko (4379, Frederick S. Barde Collection, OHS).

retirement in 1915. Many entries reflect a discipline he had learned, arising at the “peep” of day, washing his face and brushing his hair. On occasion, he expressed a simple thanks for something to eat. Similarly, he recorded -more generalized thanks to his “heavenly father” on the Wednesday preceding Thanksgiving in 1907. Other entries illustrated his awareness of events from national holidays to the election of President William McKinley.⁶

Most of his days were filled with routines or work not related directly to his ministry. This ranged from gardening to varied duties as translator and facilitator for the Darlington Agency and other groups dealing with the Cheyennes. At other times he translated at a store, assisted in recruiting for the Haskell Institute, and worked in some capacity with Cheyenne freighting efforts. These efforts help to explain the reported admiration he gained from Cheyenne agent John Miles and *Cheyenne Transporter* publisher Lafe Merritt.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Thursday December 24th 1885
 To day in the morning I got up
 my face and hand I take up
 very glad to write my journal I
 very pleasant morning look like
 Christmas I was also glad the
 my dear girl 14 day old now
 last time her birthday myself and
 my dear Mary & Alf together go down
 to the mission I am very glad
 to all Christmas eve and also
 glad to get Christmas present to
 us weather so warm and very
 pleasant Mary to get two quilts - was present

Friday December 25th 1885
 To day in the morning I was
 my face and hand I take up
 I walk down to Agency
 It is very pleasant day is just
 like Christmas I am very
 very glad to think that
 all white men we have
 big home because our nation
 born To day weather warm
 and very pleasant

Saturday December 26th 1885
 To day in the morning I get up
 my face and hand I take up
 table I write my journal that
 my breakfast I was very glad
 to think that was made and
 my dear Mary and Alf
 they send to us I am also

Excerpt from the Oakerhater journals, 1885 (OHS).

Together the journals answer the questions I had about the extent of his participation in tribal events and related relationships outside of his ministry. There was a widespread concern among those promoting missions and other assimilation efforts among the tribes that too much contact with tribal practices might encourage Native people to abandon civilization and return to “the blanket.” That concern and its language not only reflect the inherent racism and unrealistic expectations in much of the assimilationist agenda, but it also points to the challenge faced by converts such as Oakerhater. The limited economic and cultural opportunities on the reservations caused many of Oakerhater’s cohorts as well as subsequent generations of graduates from



Group at the Convocation of the Missionary District of Oklahoma and Indian Territories, Oklahoma City, 1898. Left to right, lower step: Bishop Francis Key Brooke, F. R. Jones, F. B. Lillie, Erastus de Wolf. Second step: F. C. Smith, Thos. Lloyd, A. B. Nicholas. Third step: George Biller, A. V. Francis, T. J. Brookes, a layman, Henry B. Smith. Top row in back: David Oakerhater, D. A. Sanford (21151.1, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collections, OHS).

varied educational programs to abandon most if not all of their efforts toward assimilation. In fact, Paul Zotom drifted from his Episcopal commitments a few years after Wicks departed.

The short answer to my questions is that Oakerhater's conversion to the white man's way did not mean abandonment of either his Native culture or any evident weakening of his commitment to the "Jesus Road." He attended at least one Sun Dance and regularly visited other Cheyenne and intertribal dances across western Oklahoma. Even after he retired from the ministry and his age limited his travel, he attended tribal events at Blaine County fairs. Other travel seemed focused primarily on visits to see tribal acquaintances and friends from his time at Fort Marion. He frequently, however, used these occasions to promote his message to the Cheyennes and others he encountered. Travel to locations such as Lawton, Anadarko, and Cantonment also brought

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

him into regular contact with mission sites, including those of other denominations, especially the work of John Seger who was working with a Dutch Reformed ministry at Colony.

Many notes deal with family, and the volume beginning with 1905 contains the record for his 1895 marriage to White Buffalo Woman, who was thereafter known as Minnie. The ceremony was performed by David Sanford, the priest assigned to the Cheyenne mission at that time and who had baptized Minnie the previous year. The journal opens with the report of the birth of a son, the one child who survived Oakerhater. A daughter had died previously and he also had lost children from an earlier marriage. He recorded some of the deaths from his extended family including his mother, Mother Pendleton; Susie Pendleton; his older brother Little Medicine; and his nephew, the son of his younger brother Wolf Tongue. He noted both the death of Lizzie Whiteshield and a visit to her gravesite, which had been robbed for the elk tooth dress in which she had been buried.

Other than family members, he also mentions Prairie Chief, Whiteshield, Wolf Feather, Little Chief, Deer Creeping, White Man, Red Skin, Joe Whiteshield, Stacy Riggs, and Paul Tsaitkopita. Tsaitkopita may have been a Kiowa and possibly a prisoner at Fort Marion. Riggs continued some of Oakerhater's ministry after his retirement in 1915.

The pattern of his ministry changed after the establishment of Whirlwind Mission in 1904. Whirlwind Mission operated as an Episcopal day school and base of operations for Episcopal work among the Cheyennes from 1904–15. Prior to that development he seemed to have concentrated his efforts in the area around Darlington with occasional trips to outlying Cheyenne camps on the reservation and to tribal dances. The scope and frequency of these trips indicate that he may have been pursuing a kind of circuit ministry. The most frequent visits were to Colony, where he maintained a working relationship with John Seger. His duties with the children at Whirlwind and their parents who often camped in the area limited his travel, but he continued to visit camps and powwows with some regularity, especially during the summer. He also traveled as needed to conduct funerals. Collectively these patterns suggest he may have had a wider influence than previously understood. In particular that also means that he was able to maintain some continuity for his work despite prolonged periods in which he was relatively isolated. That achievement further affirms both his commitments and his abilities.

Oakerhater corresponded with varied Episcopal figures outside Oklahoma, especially in the earlier years of his ministry. He continued a correspondence with Julia Emery, one of the women who had helped

fund his ministerial training, until at least 1908. Bishop Francis Key Brooke also remained an important supporter during this time and in later years, visiting Oakerhater at his home as well as mission sites. He usually brought the gift of a chicken with him as well. The scope of these contacts may help to account for his persistence in his faith during periods of relative abandonment. Despite Bishop Brooke's efforts to support the Cheyenne mission, the work was effectively abandoned with no priest to support Oakerhater's work from Wicks's departure until David Sanford's arrival in 1895. The lack of a priest limited ministries as deacons such as Oakerhater could not perform baptisms, marriages, or other sacraments.

Sanford remained in the field until 1907. A succession of short-term priests, including Sherman Coolidge, worked briefly among the Cheyennes during the next four years, but the work languished until the arrival of Deaconess Harriet Bedell, who served at Whirlwind from 1911–15. Unfortunately Oakerhater did not offer details about their work or his impression of them except to note that the children would miss Mrs. Sanford after she left Whirlwind. The pattern of his notes, however, supports other evidence that the period of Sanford's ministry from 1895–1907 framed the most vital years for Episcopal work among the Cheyennes. Whirlwind Mission was closed and Oakerhater retired in 1915, ending sustained Episcopal work with his tribe.

The journals also offer a picture of Oakerhater's finances. In the early years he had some kind of financial transaction with a religious publisher that earned him \$65, a significant addition to the \$15 monthly salary he earned from the church, and his notes hint there might have been other dealings with publishers. He also likely received some compensation for his work at the store and with the Cheyenne agency at different times. After 1904 and relocation to Whirlwind Mission, Oakerhater supplemented his income by leasing his allotment for \$300 yearly. Presumably the family earned comparable amounts from leasing Minnie's allotment. Beyond his personal finances, another volume includes some financial data pertaining to Whirlwind Mission.

The journals' contribution to questions about Oakerhater's age adds another layer of confusion to that discussion. This issue arose from my efforts and those of other historians to establish his age at the time of varied events affecting the Cheyennes during his lifetime. Assorted government documents seemed to support a birth date in the period from 1844–51. One of these documents had his signature and would have placed the year of his birth about 1845. However a tradition had grown among some family members who insisted that he had been a boy when he was taken to Fort Marion. As difficult as those con-

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



OHS Executive Director Bob Blackburn, OHS Office of American Indian Culture and Preservation Director Bill Welge, and OHS Board President Bill Corbett accept the donation of the David Pendleton Oakerhater journals from Oakerhater descendant Michelin Lopez (photograph by Tara Damron).

flicts were to reconcile, they proved even more problematic because his headstone indicates that he was 101 years old when he died in 1931. Journal entries seem to narrow the period for debate but do not provide a definitive answer. In 1892 he indicated that he was forty-five years old; in 1900 he counted himself to be fifty-two years old.

The information discussed above represents an important contribution for rounding out our understanding of his life and influence. There will be other significant gleanings to be gained from a more thorough study of the journals. Along with his life, these materials should enhance the reader's sense of reservation life in general, aspects of Cheyenne history, and the work of Christian groups among the tribes.

I found it appropriate that the family member entrusted with the journals chose to donate them to the OHS Research Division. The family has held them for decades in trust and in honor of the memory of one who earned the regard of all who knew him and recognition as a saint by his denomination. The donation ensures that Oakerhater's memory will be preserved for the future.

Endnotes

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¹ Journals of David Pendleton Oakerhater, undated, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society (hereafter cited as Oakerhater Journals).

² There is no agreement among scholars about the exact transliteration of his Cheyenne name, so a number of spellings are possible. For fuller studies of his life and work see Alvin O. Turner, "Journey to Sainthood," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 116–43; Alvin O. Turner, "Oakerhater, David Pendleton," *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed May 19, 2015, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=OA001; K. B. Kueteman, "He Goes First," 2006, accessed May 19, 2015, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/Oakerhater/bio.html>.

³ Turner, "Journey to Sainthood," 117.

⁴ Oakerhater Journals, undated.

⁵ Oakerhater Journals, July 10, 1885.

⁶ Oakerhater Journals, September 28, 1885; Oakerhater Journals, October 1, 1885; Oakerhater Journals, December 25, 1887; Oakerhater Journals, May 1, 1892; Oakerhater Journals, March 4, 1893; Oakerhater Journals, March 29, 1896.