

A NOTE IN OKLAHOMA HISTORY:
HENRY C. BROKMEYER AMONG THE CREEK INDIANS

By Donald K. Pickens*

White men came to the Indian Territory for many reasons. The reason for Henry Conrad Brokmeyer's (1828-1906) presence is engaging. The effect of his sojourn on the Creek Indians is a historical mystery.

Born near Munden, Prussia, Brokmeyer received a German common school education. Rebellng against conscription, he migrated to the United States. With a few English words and less money, the youth, as a jack-of-all-trades, worked his way across the country to Mississippi via the Ohio river valley. In the South, he made a small fortune in a shoe factory using slave labor. Tiring of business, he entered Georgetown University (Kentucky). Later, he attended Brown University. At both institutions his love of scholarly disputation limited his formal academic achievement. In 1854, discontented with civilization, he settled in Warren County, Missouri for a pastoral existence. Apparently, at this time, his discovery of Hegel softened his financial difficulties. Two years later the philosopher arrived in St. Louis where he worked days as an iron molder. His nights were spent studying German literature and philosophy.

By 1858, in St. Louis, Brokmeyer met William T. Harris (1835-1909), the future United States Commissioner of Education and other serious idealists. After another brief time in the wilderness Brokmeyer returned to St. Louis. Supported by Harris and other individuals, Brokmeyer began a translation of Hegel's *Logic*. He completed the first draft on the eve of the Civil War.

Putting aside the manuscript and with it the hope of making St. Louis the philosophical capital of the New World, Brokmeyer raised a Union regiment and became a colonel. Just as quickly, false charges of disloyalty put him in jail. Indicative of the tempestuous times, after his hasty release he was elected to the Missouri legislature. He opposed efforts to punish Southern sympathizers.

After the war, as a lawyer, he climbed the local political ladder. He played a significant role in the state constitutional

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convention of 1875. Elected lieutenant governor, for the next two years he served as acting governor because of the elected governor's illness. Thwarted in his ambition to be a United States senator by the election of an ex-Confederate, Brokmeyer retired from politics.¹

Meanwhile, in his personal life, his first wife died in 1864, and he remarried three years later. In his philosophic activity, he became President of the St. Louis Philosophical Society in 1866. Working with Harris and Denton J. Snider (1841-1925), the Society published the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, whose learned pages gained a greater reputation in Europe than in the United States.² The group strove to make St. Louis the center for Hegelian philosophy, the future creed (they hoped) for post-war Americans. Accordingly, St. Louis' material growth would match this philosophic desire. Unfortunately, Chicago became the economic center of the middle west and Americans, lay and learned, ignored Hegelian dialectics. By 1880, Henry C. Brokmeyer, ex-politician and fulltime philosopher was weary of civilization.

After his political retirement, Brokmeyer became a legal counsel to a railroad company.³ The business took him to Oklahoma; he developed an interest in the Creek Indians. After serving as a Missouri elector for Grover Cleveland in 1884, he spent longer periods of time among them. He returned on rare occasions to midwestern cities to lecture on Hegel and thereby help Snider spread the gospel. The last ten years of his life,

¹ For fuller biographical details see Henry A. Pockmann *German Culture In America 1840-1860* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), pp. 343-445. Robert C. Whittemore *Bakers Of The American Mind* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1964), pp. 205-208.

² For a fuller explanation of the St. Louis Movement see *ibid.*, p. 207 and Pockmann *German Culture In America*, pp. 257-264. Sakler was a "writer of books" who published his own works. See the citation below for his autobiography. All the references cited in this note contain information on Snider's life and career. The University of Oklahoma library has some Snider manuscripts. See *The Norman Transcript* (January 20, 1929) for a description of the buildings, and Charles M. Perry "The St. Louis Movement in Philosophy" *The Source Magazine* (November, 1929). For an account of the movement in a larger context see Henry A. Pockmann *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism* (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation Inc., 1948).

³ Indicative of the meager and sometimes confusing historical materials about Brokmeyer's career, two different railroads are named that employed him. See the letters Herbert C. Calhoun to Chon Forbes (November 21, 1928), C. W. Turner to Chon Forbes (November 27, 1928) and E. C. Brokmeyer (Henry's son) to Charles M. Perry (July 5, 1929) all cited in Charles M. Perry, editor *The St. Louis Movement in Philosophy, Some Source Material* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1930) on pages 47, 48, 50. This book is a vital source on the history of the movement.

Brokmeyer spent in St. Louis working on his translation of Hegel's *Logic*. His literal translation was never published. A manuscript copy is in the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis.

For students in Oklahoma history the record of Brokmeyer's stay among the Indians is meager. Two witnesses claimed that Brokmeyer neither taught philosophy to the Indians nor organized a philosophical society among them.⁴ The first historian of the St. Louis Movement, Denton J. Snider, however gave a different account though tribal records are silent about this event:⁵

... deeply disillusioned, he quit political life and fled from civilization back to the Hedmen of the forest, where he stayed long and formed a little philosophical Society. Once at Muskogee [sic.] in the Indian Territory, I heard him explaining the deeper philosophy of deer-stalking in a paw woot with some Creek Indians. They all seemed to hail him as one of themselves: "Big Indian, good Indian." And he looked it—the massive grinnace, the coppery tint, the wild eye of him.

Mightier in verbal conflict than with the pen, Henry Brokmeyer left no written account of his days in the Indian Territory. Never comfortable in writing English, the only existing Brokmeyer book is *A Mechanic Diary* written in 1856 and privately published after his death. Many questions come to mind about the situation.⁶ But the answers do not exist. For example, did he take his family with him to Oklahoma? The answer is apparently no. The Creeks did confer upon him the title of "Great White Father" and offered him his choice of the fairest maidens of the tribe—an offer which his Hegelianism compelled him regretfully to decline.⁷

⁴ Cleon Forbes "The St. Louis School of Thought" *Missouri Historical Review* XXXI (October, 1931), p. 71. See also the letters written by C. W. Turner cited in Perry, editor *The St. Louis Movement In Philosophy*, pp. 47-48.

⁵ Denton J. Snider *The St. Louis Movement In Philosophy, Literature, Education, Psychology With Chapters of Autobiography* (St. Louis: Nigam Publishing Company, 1920), pp. 101-102. He (Brokmeyer) once persuaded Snider to leave his Homer classes to him and start a kindergarten for Indian children in Muskogee. Forbes "The St. Louis School of Thought" in *Missouri Historical Review* Vol. XXV (October, 1930), p. 90.

⁶ Letter from Mr. Chester Bury, Tribal Operations Officer Bureau of Indian Affairs, United States Department of the Interior, Muskogee, Oklahoma, August 17, 1906 to D. K. Pickens; also, a letter from Miss Thea Wazmanek, Director Creek Council House and Museum, Muskogee, Oklahoma, October 1, 1906 to D. K. Pickens. Brokmeyer's son claimed his father "was a warm personal friend of the late General Pleasant Porter, Chief of the Creek Nation." A letter from E. C. Brokmeyer to Charles M. Perry cited in Perry, editor *The St. Louis Movement In Philosophy*, p. 50.

⁷ Dockman *German Culture In America*, p. 644.

Disappointments in politics and philosophical endeavors encouraged his lengthy visits among the Indians. Undoubtedly his wanderlust, his Germanic sentimentalism about primitive values and the folk spirit, encouraged his desire to see the Creek Indians as natural men living honest lives in opposition to the white man's civilized artificialities. The curious historian can only wonder about the Creek understanding of Brokmeyer's dialectical explanations of Indian life. The detailed story of this missionary of Hegelian speculation among the Creeks must remain a curio of Oklahoma history.