

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE CREEK NATION, 1865-1871

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The change in the economic life of the Creek Nation during the immediate years after the close of the Civil War, from 1865 to 1871, reached revolutionary proportions.

When the war ended, the Creek people were deeply divided on political issues and widely scattered outside of their own borders. Their location in Indian Territory was south and west of the Cherokee Nation, principally between the Arkansas and Canadian rivers, an area that became a veritable no-man's land during the hostilities. With the existence of dangerous wartime conditions, many Creeks were forced to flee from their homes. Those loyal to the United States were led to the North by Opothleyahola in 1861. Estimated at 6,000, or roughly half of the total Creek Nation, the group settled in squalid refugee camps in Kansas for most of the war. The Creek citizens with Southern sympathies spent those dire years on Confederate soil in the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations. Calculated at 6,500 strong, this band fared relatively well under refugee circumstances.

Repatriation of the Creeks occurred gradually throughout 1865. In February, the Northern members of the tribe began to reoccupy their homeland. Largely fullblooded and conservative in outlook, they preferred to retreat into the isolated blackjack hills of their country. Many former slaves, who had been attached to both the Northern and Southern contingents, constructed settlements in the valley between the Arkansas and Verdigris rivers. The return of the Southern Creeks was facilitated by the preliminary peace conference at Fort Smith, Arkansas, in September, 1865. The Northern delegation was led by Ok-tor-how-sos-har-cho, known as Sands. Assured by the conciliatory speeches of this delegation, the Southern Creeks undertook their resettlement near North Fork Town on the Canadian river during the following winter months. Characterized by their mixed blood and their progressive attitudes, they were led by Colonel Samuel Checote.

Abandoned property in the Creek Nation fared poorly during the four years of war. The Northern Creeks alone estimated their losses at more than \$5,000,000.¹ Several examples indicate the extent of the damage to

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¹ Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), p. 189.

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homes and public buildings. Nothing was left of the Creek Agency, situated south of the Arkansas River ten miles west of Fort Gibson, "except lonely, dilapidated chimneys, and here and there, solitary pairs of gate-posts."² The council house at Wekiwa Hulwo—High Spring—was completely destroyed. The two mission schools, Tullahassee across the Arkansas River from the agency and Asbury near North Fork Town, were gutted. Not only were the Creeks inadequately housed in 1865, but they also had to begin anew the preparation of farmlands. In 1859, an estimated 1 in 5,000 acres of Creek land was under cultivation.³ As the lands then totalled 6,501,120 acres, approximately 1,300 acres were being farmed when the Civil War abruptly interrupted Creek life. All now lay in ruins from prolonged neglect.

More sinister in its implications than the fate of farm lands was the destruction of the Creek cattle herds, which constituted the main wealth of the tribe in ante-bellum days. Left untended, the herds were easy prey for marauders. Fully 300,000 head of cattle, valued at \$4,000,000, were driven from Indian Territory during the Civil War. A band of cattle operators, complete with sentinels, scouts and herdsmen drove herds to Kansas in a highly organized fashion.⁴ Apparently, some military and civil authorities considered the cattle contraband and condoned the plunder. Major George A. Reynolds, an Indian agent deputized to break up the raiding parties, lamented that theft of Indian cattle was "a profitable and semi-respectable business."⁵ By the end of 1864, the Creek Nation had been completely stripped of livestock.

Under these circumstances, the Creeks were an utterly impoverished people in 1865. When the guns were silenced at the close of the war, they were dependent upon the government for subsistence rations. They needed to rebuild their mills and replace their destroyed agricultural implements, seeds and breeding stock. Many Creeks were obliged to break ground with hoes during the first year of reconstruction. Major James W. Dunn, Creek agent at the time, also requested wearing apparel for them in a report to the Southern Superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who had jurisdiction over the entire Indian Territory. "My people . . . are nearly destitute

² James W. Dunn to Elijah Sells, September 20, 1865, United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, 121 Session, 39th Congress, Executive Document 1248 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865), p. 475.

³ Elias Rector to A. B. Greenwood, October 25, 1859, United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1859*, 1st Session, 36th Congress, Senate Executive Document 1023 (Washington: George W. Bowman, 1860), p. 328.

⁴ Elijah Sells to D. N. Cooley, October 16, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, pp. 436-437.

⁵ George A. Reynolds to Elijah Sells, June 28, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, p. 417.

of clothing of any kind," he emphasized. "I earnestly call your attention to the fact; if neglected, I shall not wish to remain here to witness the consequent suffering."⁶

Just six years later, the material status of the Creek people was radically changed for the better. To clarify the growth of the Creek economy between 1865 and 1871, it is necessary to consider first certain questions of population and geography. Then statistical information, which so eloquently tells the tale of Creek advancement in the interval, will be presented and interpreted. Figures, however, do not reveal the forces behind them. Because they were pivotal officers in tribal economic affairs, the several Creek agents who served in the period must be judged. The picture of the Creek economy in the first crucial years of the reconstruction era will thereby be rounded out.

A reliable census figure for the Creek Nation before the end of the nineteenth century is impossible to find. From 1832 to 1859, the Creeks numbered between 20,000 and 25,000 and the census of 1859 revealed a population of 13,550, which is accepted here as including slaves. After a careful roll call in 1867, Dunn enumerated 11,815 Creeks, of whom 1,700 were Negroes. Creek deaths resulting from the Civil War, in the light of this data, amounted to 1,735.⁷ In the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868*, the Creek population was listed variously as 12,294, 12,003 and 14,396.⁸ In spite of fluctuations, the figure of 12,294 appeared most frequently in the official reports between 1867 and 1870. It was increased to an estimated 13,000 in 1871. Thus, the Creek population was relatively stable and stood at something over 12,000 between 1865 and 1871.

The Negroes had formed an important element in the Creek Nation since the eighteenth century. Most Creeks felt little prejudice against intermarriage with Negroes, even as slaves, and accepted them as free citizens at the conclusion of the war. Major General John B. Sandborn, Commissioner for Regulating Relations between Freedmen in the Indian Territory and their Former Masters, spoke for many government officials when he judged that the Negroes were "the most industrious, economical and, in many re-

⁶ James W. Dunn to Elijah Sellis, September 20, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, p. 475.

⁷ James W. Dunn to James Wortham, August 25, 1865, United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1867* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868), p. 320; Debo, *The Road to Disappearance*, pp. 177-178; John R. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 73* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), pp. 438-439.

⁸ United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868*, 3rd Session, 40th Congress, Executive Document 1366. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1869), pp. 812, 813, 505.

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spects, the more intelligent portion of the population of the Indian territory."⁹

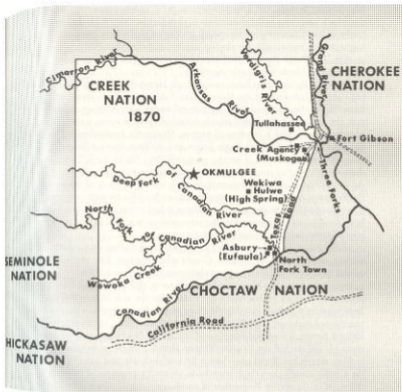
Under the Treaty of 1866, the Creeks were forced to sell the unsettled western half of the domain granted to them in 1832, when they were removed from Alabama and Georgia. The huge secession of 3,250,560 acres did not affect trading patterns established before the Civil War. Such disruption was left to the railroads, which began to push through the Creek Nation in 1871. In the 1865-1871 period, Creek trade was still dependent upon two overland wagon routes: the Texas Road, leading from Fort Gibson down the eastern edge of the Nation to North Fork Town, and the California Road, running just below the Creek Nation's southern frontier. Proximity to these roads, as well as to rivers navigable during the spring, caused two sites to continue as flourishing trading centers—the Creek Agency and North Fork Town.

The Creek Agency was the more important of the two communities. Its river trade was handled at a landing near Three Forks, where the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand rivers converge. The landing and the Texas Road were connected to the trading center, which was located near Fern Mountain several miles to the west, by a well-used road. After the interruption of the war, business resumed officially at the site when the post office was reinstated in May, 1867.¹⁰

At least fifty Indian and Negro families lived at the agency in the post-bellum period. Dunn erected a double log house, situated some distance from the square in a field, for his office. James A. Patterson's store became the principal emporium at the agency. Called the "Picket Store," it was constructed of blackjack posts stuck in the ground and daubed with red clay. Patterson was associated in the business with George W. Stidham, a resident of North Fork Town who had been a merchant in the area before the war. Other stores were operated by J. S. Atkinson and a Mr. Parkinson. Sophy Canard ran a cake shop, while her husband sold whiskey. An inn kept by a Negress, Aunt Sarah Davis, was famous for clean accommodations and good food. It was typical of the frontier taverns of the time. Inside a fenced yard were several log cabins: one for a kitchen, one for a dining room and the others for bedrooms. Joseph Sondheimer, a German, based his fur trading

⁹ John B. Sandborn to James Harlan, January 5, 1866, United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1866* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), p. 283.

¹⁰ George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (Summer, 1948), p. 236; Grand Foreman, *Merchants, the Biography of an Oklahoma Town* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), p. 13.



Map of the Creek Nation in 1870 showing the important towns, rivers and roads.

activities at the agency.¹¹ The Southern Superintendency was even located there for a year prior to the dissolution of the office in 1869. With the coming of the railroad, business at the agency gravitated to the new town of Muskogee, which was rapidly developing nearby, and the post office was closed in 1872. The Creek Agency itself was amalgamated into the Union Agency established at Muskogee shortly thereafter.

Not only did the Texas Road run through North Fork Town, but it was built at the confluence of the Canadian and the North Fork rivers not far from the California Road. It had a natural location for trading. After the war, the community had been rebuilt to include several stores, a saw mill, a boarding house and a number of homes. Mercantile establishments were operated by Sidham, Gray Eagle Seales and William Nero, a Negro. The post office was reinstated in service in April, 1867. North Fork Town was designated as one of three Negro towns among the forty-six settlements in the Creek Nation. Perhaps this explains why a Negro citizen of the period, the Reverend Sugar T. George, served as town king for twenty-two years.¹² The railroad brought doom to the town as it had to the agency, but a year later. Businesses were moved to the new community of Eufaula, and the post office was largely unused after 1873.

As the principal Indian meeting place, the Creek capital was a potential trading center. After the war, the Creeks selected a new location for their capital in the geographical heart of their country, named it Okmulgee and constructed a two-story log council house there in 1868. Okmulgee then was situated on a lonely prairie thirty-five miles from the nearest post office and hampered by a lack of suitable drinking water. Nevertheless, a post office was opened at the site the following year. John E. Turner, Captain Frederick Ballard Severs, a Captain Sanger and a Captain Belcher carried on trade there by the end of the decade. Turner found a brisk market for fancy saddles, which he offered in exchange for buffalo hides, and issued goods to the Creeks during the winter months in return for promises of cattle to be delivered in the spring. Regardless of much conversation about moving the

¹¹ Debo, *The Road to Disappearance*, p. 289; C. W. Turner, "Events Among the Muskogees during Sixty Years," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. X, No. 1 (March, 1932), p. 22; Ella Robinson, "History of the Patterson Mercantile Company," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1 (Spring, 1958), p. 53; L. M. S. Wilson, "Reminiscences of Jim Tomen," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4 (Autumn, 1966), p. 296. Parkinson may have been James Parkinson who opened a store in Muskogee in 1875 with John E. Turner.

¹² Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *North Fork Town (Muskogee)*; Hoffman (Printing Company, 1961), pp. 9, 30; Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "Two Notable Women of the Creek Nation," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3 (Autumn, 1957), p. 327; Shisk, "First Post Office within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVI, p. 257.

agency to Okmulgee, these plans never came to fruition, and the Creek capital remained an isolated village.¹³

Creek progress in agricultural output during early reconstruction was spectacular. Even in the difficult days of 1865, the tribe more than doubled cultivated acreage over the 1,300 acres reported in 1859. Within a two-year span, acreage was doubled yet again to 6,000. Captain Francis Almon Field, the Creek agent, reported in 1870 that there were "more acres of ground cultivated this year than were ever known before."¹⁴ He was guilty of a marked understatement. In 1871, fully 28,600 acres were tilled.

A study of corn, the great dependence of the people, corroborates the conclusion that the Creeks became an agricultural people after the Civil War to an extent unknown in their previous history. In 1836, they had 30,000 bushels of surplus corn to sell. During the 1840s, corn yields reached the highest levels of the pre-war period. In 1846, for example, over 100,000 bushels were exported. The 1850s were years of agricultural depression caused by severe drought and consequently years of food shortages.¹⁵ From 1865 to 1871, a surge in corn production beyond the high levels reported in the 1840s can readily be seen. In 1866, the Creeks raised 125,000 bushels of corn. Because government relief was discontinued in that year, the figure of 125,000 bushels presumably represents domestic consumption for the 12,000 citizens of the Creek Nation. In 1871, the Creeks raised 625,000 bushels of corn or an export crop of 500,000 bushels. Not only did the corn surplus increase five times over that of 1846, but a much smaller population existed to produce it.

An unprecedented use of the plow can also be noted in other Creek harvests. While under 10,000 bushels of potatoes were grown annually between 1865 and 1868, the 1871 potato yield was 100,000 bushels. Turnip crops grew in size. Wheat and oat harvest decreased in the years under study, but they were not an important item in the Creek diet. The Creek agent also reported in 1871 that the Creeks had produced: 1,200 bushels of peanuts worth \$1,200;

¹³ L. N. Robinson to N. G. Taylor, November 16, 1868, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868*, p. 235; Turner, "Events Among the Muskogees during Sixty Years," *The Chronicle of Oklahoma*, Vol. X, pp. 23, 27-28.

¹⁴ P. A. Field to E. S. Packot, September 1, 1870, United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1870), p. 207.

¹⁵ Norman Arthur Graebner, "Pioneer Indian Agriculture in Oklahoma," *The Chronicle of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1945), pp. 234, 238, 245; James Logan to W. Medill, November 9, 1847, United States War Department, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1847*, 111 Session, 30th Congress, Senate Executive Document 503 (Washington: Wendell and Van Benthuysen, 1847), p. 867.

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700 bushels of pecans valued at \$1,400; 7,000 pounds of cotton worth \$1,250; and 1,200 pounds of tobacco valued at \$3,600. Obviously, the Creeks were assimilated into the white man's economy on an agrarian base. Dunn observed, "They have surrendered the spoils of the chase for the fruits of agriculture."¹⁶

Although the Creeks increased livestock holdings in the 1865-1871 period, they had not regained their eminence in this area. Vigorous measures were taken by the Southern Superintendent to limit the illegal cattle thefts. The depletion of cattle herds compelled the chiefs to prohibit cattle sales in 1866.¹⁷ Both federal and local policies seemed to be beneficial, for the number of cattle in the Nation grew from 1,000 to 25,000. Strides in ownership of horses and swine were also made.

Construction was hindered by a lack of saw mills. Dunn reported in 1868 that no one appeared "enterprising or courageous enough" to supply the demand.¹⁸ The 1,000 homes built between 1865 and 1871 were log ones. However, in the latter year, 250,000 feet of lumber were sawed and six saw mills were in operation.¹⁹ Ten blacksmiths, obvious assets to building activities, were supported by the Creek government after 1867. Progress seemed to be the watchword in construction following a slow start.

The agents assigned to the Creeks were in a position to influence economic development more than any other single individuals. They administered the considerable financial obligations of the United States government to the Creek Nation. The Creeks, as most Indians, were dependent upon federal annuity and other payments. These may or may not have hindered self-sufficiency; nevertheless, much money passed through the hands of the Creek agents. For example, in 1867, \$200,000 in cash was distributed by the agent under the terms of the Treaty of 1866, and in 1868, \$142,890 was paid out to surviving orphans or their descendants as stipulated in the Treaty of 1832. The great trust reposed in all Indian agents was recognized in the highest office of the Indian Bureau. Commissioner Dennis N. Cooley stressed the necessity of obtaining services of "a class of men who may be expected to keep aloof from . . . reprehensible conduct." Commissioner N. G. Taylor mentioned "the heavy bond" under which agents were

¹⁶ James W. Dunn to James Wortham, August 25, 1867, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1867*, p. 321.

¹⁷ James W. Dunn to Elijah Sells, October, 1866, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1866*, p. 320.

¹⁸ James W. Dunn to L. N. Robinson, October 12, 1868, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868*, p. 744.

¹⁹ F. S. Lyon to H. R. Clum, October 20, 1871, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1871*, p. 577.

placed.²⁰ Not only did the agents serve as responsible financial officers, but they could advise the Indians in their struggle for survival in the white man's world. F. S. Lyon, the agent in 1871, suggested a model farm at the agency for this very purpose.²¹

Four men functioned as Creek agents in the years 1865 to 1871. Major George A. Cutler was agent for the Northern Creeks from 1861 to July, 1865. At that time, James W. Dunn took over the office, which he held until July, 1869. Francis A. Field succeeded Dunn for a period of fifteen months. After a vacancy of six months, the agency was filled by Lyon in April, 1871. This civilian appointment resulted from a law prohibiting the employment of Army officers outside military positions.²² Because their tenure was longest and spanned the years most crucial to this discussion, Cutler and Dunn were the most important men to evaluate.

There were indications that Cutler was implicated in the notorious cattle raids. Colonel William A. Phillips, who led the First Regiment of the Indian Home Guards during the war, apparently embarked on a personal crusade on behalf of the Indians during 1864. In January, 1865, he charged Colonel William G. Coffin, then in charge of the Southern Superintendency, and the agents under him of irregular acts. Cutler was forced to defend himself in April, 1865. "I have never made gains or speculated in any way with cattle in the Indian territory," he wrote.²³ There were some indications that Superintendent Coffin's administration was riddled with misdeeds, and Cutler must have known about this situation, if not guilty of outright dishonesty himself.²⁴ Dunn met Cutler in Kansas to take over the Creek Agency, and after Cutler had relinquished books, papers and a few bank vouchers, he alleged that there was no more government property in his hands. Dunn did not find any additional vouchers at the temporary Creek Agency, then located at Fort Gibson in the Cherokee Nation. Making no accusations, Dunn nonetheless saw fit to report these details to his superior officer.²⁵

²⁰ D. N. Cowley to James Harlan, October 31, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, p. 170; N. G. Taylor to O. H. Browning, November 23, 1868, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868*, p. 482.

²¹ F. S. Lyon to H. R. Clem, October 20, 1871, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1871*, pp. 577-578.

²² E. S. Parker to I. D. Cox, October 31, 1870, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1870*, p. 10.

²³ George A. Cutler to William G. Coffin, April 16, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, p. 458.

²⁴ Angie Debo, *The American Indians under Reconstruction* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1925), pp. 43, 91, 93.

²⁵ James W. Dunn to Elijah Selks, September 20, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1865*, p. 474.

While Cutler's work lies under the shadow of suspicion, Dunn's record deserves much credit. His thorough reports speak volumes for his efficiency and reliability. He wished to isolate the Indians on reservations, restrict their association with white men and develop their self-sufficiency. However Dunn's views on Creek reconstruction are judged, they were motivated by a genuine affection for the people in his care. Dunn strongly believed that promises made to Indians should be kept, and he championed the cause of the Creek orphans, whose claims under the Treaty of 1832 were ignored for over thirty years. He also worked in vain for a revision of the Treaty of 1866 to benefit the Creeks.²⁶ At a time when the dearth of good Indian agents was loudly lamented, the Creeks were fortunate to have Dunn in their midst.

A reappraisal of economic conditions in the Creek Nation just after the close of the Civil War reveals giant strides in many directions. Whether in crop production, in animal husbandry or in housing starts, the accent was on advancement. Underneath all of these manifestations of progress lay a revolutionary change in Creek life. The Creek was no longer primarily a wandering hunter out of step with the modern world developing so rapidly around him, but a peaceful farmer who belonged to his environment. There were within the Creek Nation elements which called for a "restoration of the old laws, manners and customs, drifting back toward the dark past," but the old means of livelihood could not be disinterred.²⁷ Assimilation into the white man's economy was inevitable. That the path was made easier by representatives of the United States government is significant. Whatever accusations can be leveled against the white man for his abuse of the Creeks, among them is not the alteration of Creek economic life.

²⁶ James W. Dunn to Elijah Sells, October, 1866, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1866*, p. 319; James W. Dunn to James Wardham, August 25, 1867, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1867*, p. 321; James W. Dunn to L. N. Robinson, July 6, 1869, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1869*, pp. 413, 414; Berlin R. Chapman, "Unsatisfied Treaty with the Creeks, 1868," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (September, 1938), pp. 342-345.

²⁷ F. S. Lyon to H. R. Clem, October 20, 1871, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1871*, p. 574.