

Iti Fabussa



Question from reader:

I know that during the closing years of the 19th century Choctaws were divided as to the question of whether or not to allot the land or keep its ownership in common. We have a family story told to me by one of my grandfather's brothers about neighborhood troubles during this time.

My mother told me the two groups were called "the Progressives" and the "Stand-patters." My question is this: Were there other names given to the two groups and who were the leaders of each group?

Response from Iti Fabussa:

The decades leading up to Oklahoma statehood were a trying, but yet defining time in the history of the Choctaw Nation. During these years, perhaps more pointedly than at any other time, Choctaw people were forced to make a series of difficult decisions about whether and how much to assimilate within the surrounding United States and how much to maintain their ancient Choctaw identity and sovereignty.

At this time, two main parties were vying for political power within the Choctaw Nation. One group, known as "Progressives" or "Eagles" (or as "Bald Eagles" by their opponents), tended to be in favor of the Americanization of the Tribe and the allotment of what had always been jointly owned Tribal land to individuals. The other party was known as the "Nationals" (also called "Buzzards" by their opponents). They tended to focus their efforts on maintaining Choctaw social and political autonomy and traditional ways.

The conflict between the two reached its high point during the Tribal election of 1892. Incumbent Chief Wilson Jones ran for the Progressives. His opponent was Jacob B. Jackson, a college-educated full-blood Choctaw.

The election was an uncharacteristically violent one, and on September 11th 1892, a band of Nationals shot and killed four members of the Progressive Party, then traveled to McAlester, intending to kill more. In the following chaos, Chief Wilson Jones used his power to ask the Indian Agent to martially restore order to the Choctaw Nation.

A peace agreement was reached on September 15th, and the Nationals surrendered 17 men implicated in the killings and then dispersed. However, confusion and mistrust between both parties continued. On

October 4th, the election was held at the Tvshkahomma Council House, with a detachment of United States cavalry present at the bequest of Chief Jones. Jones won the election by a count of 1705 to 1697 votes. Not wishing to see further disturbance within the Nation, the Nationals withdrew and did not contest the close election.

Nine of the 17 Nationals arrested in McAlester were sentenced to death by Tribal Court. U.S. authorities then commuted the sentences of all but one, Silan Lewis who was convicted of the assassination of Joe Haklotubbee. According to an ancient Choctaw custom, Lewis was given a period of freedom to get his affairs in order and is said to have even laid in his coffin to make sure it fit him. Lewis willingly appeared on the day of execution, November 5th, 1894 and was shot by a Lighthorseman. This was the last execution conducted under Choctaw Tribal law.

The election of 1894 passed peacefully, with Jefferson Gardner elected as Chief. Although a Progressive, he held an anti-allotment position and managed to postpone it through the duration of his tenure as Principle Chief.

Concurrently, a strong traditionalist, anti-allotment movement known as the "Four Mothers Society" formed among between the Choctaws, Chickasaw, Creek/Seminole, and Cherokee. Chitto Harjo, from the conservative Creek town of Arbeika was the leader of this 24,000-member coalition.

In 1896 the tide within Choctaw Nation turned back in favor of allotment, with the election of Green McCurtain as Principle Chief. Almost immediately, the process irrevocably began.

Please mail your questions to Iti Fabussa c/o BISHINIK, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702, or e-mail to bishinik@choctawnation.com with "Iti Fabussa" in the subject line.

Editor's Note: Due to the volume of the response to this column our writers will prioritize the questions according to topics and space availability. We will publish as many as possible in future issues of the newspaper.