



A Bond of Friendship

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I grew up in a remote area of northern Wisconsin, our closest neighbors Native Americans. Some three miles away was the home of another Native American, Mr. O'Mara, where my father took tools and farm machinery to be repaired. My schooling began at the one-room Gaslyn Creek school. Among my two dozen school mates were Beulah and Duane Arbuckle. Like the rest of us, they were poor, their parents trying to eke a living out of hardscrabble farmland. But unlike the rest of us, they too were Native Americans.

The little school closed after my first grade year and along with my siblings, I continued my education in the town of Spooner. So also did Beulah and Duane. Younger than they, I never really got to know them, but I remember feeling sorry for them because they were Indians.

How things have changed in the past half-century. Today my granddaughter Kayla takes great pride in the fact that she is 1/64 Native American. Her great grandfather (one-eighth native) grew up not even knowing about his heritage because his mother was so ashamed.

No longer. He collects material and sends it to Kayla and she files it away for a major college term project. And among her various self-descriptions on Facebook, she lists Cherokee. Actually, from my side of the family she's approximately 1/64 Russian, but she makes no mention of that. And I don't blame her. I would gladly trade my Russian blood for Native American—perhaps Choctaw if I could choose.

There are many reasons for my esteem for the Choctaw and their advanced civilization that pre-dated European settlers on the American continent. But there is one story that has particularly captured my attention.

The year was 1847, early spring in the impoverished Choctaw settlements of Oklahoma. News had come of the devastating Irish potato famine—the “Great Hunger” as it was often called. Although the terrible potato

blight had begun some years earlier, it was not widely published until a journalist reported appalling eye-witness accounts of children and whole families found dead of starvation on the dirt floors of their thatched hovels.

Some of those who heard the news imagined these Irish peasants were too lazy to do the arduous work of providing for themselves and their children. The Choctaw, however, saw it very differently. Indeed, the Choctaws were the first of the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes” to be uprooted from their homes and driven hundreds of miles on a death march to a land in the West that was strange to them. Unlike certain other native tribes, they were deemed “civilized” because of their advanced culture. They possessed homes, farms, schools, civic government, and had lived for centuries in what is now known as the Deep South. But white men (and women) were greedy for land.

Backed by the military and President Andrew Jackson, they were forced to leave the only homes they had ever known. Thousands starved, their bones strewn along the Trail of Tears. In fact, of the more than twenty thousand Choctaws who began that forced march, fewer than half survived the journey. Their once prosperous culture was devastated.

Those who arrived in Oklahoma might have wished they had died along the way. Poverty plagued the tribe for decades and continues today. Thus it is worth noting that only sixteen years later, when the Choctaws learned of the starvation and poverty in Ireland, they called a meeting in Scullyville, Oklahoma where it was decided to collect funds for the suffering and starving people of Ireland.

Out of their own poverty they raised \$170—truly sacrificial giving—and sent it on to the American relief organization for Ireland. No ordinary gift—one still remembered and celebrated today.

Tender mercies: 170 dollars, 170 years later—a bond of friendship between two tribes, the Choctaw and Irish. □

—Ruth Tucker