

THE FATE OF THE STATE OF SEQUOYAH

The inevitable had finally occurred, the last vestige of self government for Native Americans, Indian Territory, would soon disappear, leaving only reservations for Indians controlled by the federal government. Since Europeans had first landed on the North American Continent, first by literally innumerable broken treaties, then by force, Indian lands had been usurped. And, even after being removed from their ancestral homes, tribes were forced to move again and again to accommodate the influx of white settlers.

This most recent incursion regarding Indian Territory was predictable. After joining with the Confederacy in a losing cause against the Union, the fate of the land designated for the Five Civilized Tribes seemed unavoidable. Legal opposition pertaining to treaty rights was not a significant obstacle. Congress had assumed the power to do nearly anything it chose with the five tribes and that became evident in 1871 when two railroads, one from north to south, the other east to west, were approved and under construction. Now, beyond such overt action, there were two major issues that needed to be addressed to complete the coupe, changing Indian land from communal to private ownership and abolishing Indian governments in their present form. Land ownership was the most complex issue because since time immemorial, Native Americans regarded all territory as belonging to everyone and the governments of each of the Five Civilized Tribes reflected that tradition. Because of sovereignty, the issue of abolishing tribal governments would be time consuming, but accomplished in due time by making inroads on their authority.

Systematically, Congress began to squeeze the life out of the respective governments, not unlike an anaconda snake would squeeze the life out of a hapless victim before devouring it. In fact, that was the exact strategy that had been introduced in 1861 by U.S. Army Commander Winfield Scott to defeat the Confederacy. Block the Mississippi with gun boats, patrol the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico with a naval barricade and attack with troops from the north to squeeze the South into submission. For the next 30 years following the war, Congress adopted a similar strategy of political strangulation in Indian Territory: federal courts were established to protect the rights of non-Indians; the Dawes Commission was established and given authority to survey lands heretofore belonging to each nation; and the Curtis Act permitted towns to incorporate, gave all townsmen the right to vote, established free public schools, and abolished tribal courts. The final spasms of this particular anaconda plan that eventually squeezed the life out of Indian Territory were congressional acts making all Native Americans in Indian Territory citizens of the United States, followed by a decree ending the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes on March 4, 1906.

The pressure for the leadership of the Five Tribes to react to this threat of extinction had been evident for years. Since 1889, following the first land run, citizens living in Oklahoma Territory had sought statehood, but had been countered by spasmodic and rather disorganized resistance from the leadership in Indian Territory. However, by 1902, Indian delegates finally set aside long standing tribal differences and began meeting regularly. Finally, on August 21, 1905 the combined leadership met in Muskogee, drafted a constitution and proposed admission of Indian Territory as an entity which they agreed

would be named the State of Sequoyah. Sequoyah would be a self sufficient state. They reasoned that, not only were the 750,000 residents equal in number to Oklahoma Territory, but that Sequoyah was vastly richer in resources such as oil, gas, coal, lead, zinc as well as agricultural output.

As joint meetings of the two factions took place and differences discussed, four local options for statehood emerged: single or joint statehood involving both entities; double or separate statehood for each entity; granting Oklahoma Territory statehood and absorbing Indian governments as they were ready or just leaving Indian Territories to their own devices. But options discussed out west were not given a hearing in Washington only a single choice even had traction in Congress and the White House. In fact, no hearing was even held because political strategy overwhelmingly favored admission of both entities as one state. And finally, there never was reason to believe tribal efforts for a state of Sequoyah would succeed because there already was a bill filed for the creation of the state of Oklahoma which was enacted into law on June 16, 1906. Local efforts at compromise were ignored and the work of the government's anaconda was complete.

An occasion of interest and color, the official statehood ceremony at Guthrie on November 16, 1907, took place with the inauguration of Charles N. Haskell in the presence of a large crowd. This was followed by a symbolic wedding of a Cherokee woman representing Indian Territory and a cowboy representing Oklahoma Territory. History does not record whether or not a citizen holding a shotgun was standing nearby.

