

WORCESTER, A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

There was little reason to believe that Samuel Austin Worcester wouldn't become a preacher, after all there had been at least one minister in the family for the past six generations. However, there also was little to indicate that, during his eighty one years, not only would he become a seventh generation minister, but a publisher, conscientious objector and progenitor of one of Oklahoma's most famous politicians.

Born in 1778 in Worcester, Massachusetts, Samuel followed the footsteps of his ancestors by attending the University of Vermont, then Andover Theological Seminary. He was ordained a Congregational minister in 1825 and, as an associate of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, was assigned to Brainerd Mission to minister to the Cherokee Nation in Tennessee. Worcester and his wife Ann, settled into life at Brainerd and, in addition to the usual pastoral duties, he began work on translating portions of the Bible into the Cherokee alphabet recently developed by George Gist, Sequoyah. Worcester and his family became immersed in the Cherokee Nation in a way that mattered most to tribesmen, by becoming involved and sharing their lives, fortunes and misfortunes. In due time, Samuel was given the honorary Cherokee name *A-tse-nu-sti*, or messenger. Later in 1852, his daughter Hannah would marry a Cherokee, Abijah Hicks.

Worcester's efforts at translation became a means for introduction to Elias Boudinet and a friendship developed that would eventually result in his involvement in the founding and publishing of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. Actively engaged, he returned to Massachusetts to purchase the printing press for the paper, and also wrote commentary on issues involving the nation, particularly those created by the state of Georgia. For some time, through legislation and subtle encouragement from the federal government, the Georgia legislature attempted to make inroads on Cherokee sovereignty and property rights. Worcester became directly involved when the Georgia legislature decreed that white men entering Indian Territory were to be required to obtain permission from the state. Defying the law, Samuel and ten others were arrested by the Georgia Guard and imprisoned. Seeking to make an example of their captives, the court prescribed the maximum sentence of four years of hard labor in the Milledgeville prison. Shaken, nine of the eleven accepted pardons contingent upon their leaving the nation, but Samuel and Eliza Butler refused. Appealing their sentence during the ensuing year the case, *Samuel A. Worcester v The State of Georgia* was heard by the United States Supreme Court and the court overturned their conviction.

Worcester became a free man, but the harassment to drive out the Cherokees continued. Subsequent laws passed by the Georgia legislature resulted in the state eventually confiscating property in the Nation, including Worcester's home in New Echota. Consequently, in 1835 Samuel moved the family west to Arkansas Territory by barge following the Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. First residing at Dwight Mission near today's Salisaw, the family moved to Union Mission on the Grand River in 1836, and soon after, Samuel established a new mission at Park Hill accompanied by his trusty printing press.

For a brief period, Park Hill proved to be a pleasant respite that allowed Worcester to focus on his ministry among Western Cherokees and continued efforts of translation of segments of the Bible and selected religious songs. Joined at the mission by Chief John Ross and other prominent Cherokees, Park Hill prospered, but in 1839 tragedy struck. Elias Boudinet, now living with the family, was assassinated on June 22 in an orchestrated plot that also took the lives of John Ridge and his father, Major Ridge. The three men had been among those who signed the unpopular Treaty of New Echota, effectively ending Cherokee holdings back east. To add to his grief, that same year his beloved wife Ann died.

Samuel remarried and again settled into the life of a missionary. He died in 1859 before the ravages of the Civil War in Indian Territory occurred, although misfortune soon struck the family again. In 1862 after the war began, his oldest child Ann Eliza Robertson and her three daughters, including ten year old Alice, fled to Texas. Hannah and her family remained at Park Hill. The next year Hannah's husband Abijah was murdered while away from home, a victim of the disagreement among Cherokees regarding loyalties to the Union or the Confederacy.

The legacy of Samuel Austin Worcester continued long after his death and, in a manner of speaking, is still visible. His granddaughter, Alice Mary Robertson, served as postmaster in Muskogee and, in 1920 at age 66, was elected to Congress, becoming the first woman to preside over the House of Representatives. The Congresswoman died in 1931, but still there is another reminder. The family home in New Echota is the only building remaining in the once bustling capitol of the Cherokee Nation. Ironically, it is preserved and protected by the State of Georgia.

