

Perceptions of Chitto Harjo ('Crazy Snake') as Illuminated by
An Analysis of WPA 'Indian-Pioneer Papers'
by Jamie Mosel

For many American Indian tribes, the General Allotment Act of 1887, which eliminated communal tribal land-holding and is known more commonly as the Dawes Act, marks one of the most destructive acts issued by the United States Government and a policy that “every bit as much as Indian wars, every bit as much as the initial treaties and the “renegotiated” treaties, changed the lives of. . . Indian people across the country.”ⁱ For tribes in Oklahoma Indian territory, initially exempt from the Dawes Act, the subsequent Curtis Act of 1898 both dissolved communal land-holdings, and terminated Indian sovereignty in Indian Territory.ⁱⁱ In a break with the very ideology cited as motivation for the mass removal of tribes from the southeast -- that is, the ideology that in removing and isolating in the West, tribes might be preserved from the encroachment of American society -- the United States government decided that it was time for the Indian to be assimilated once and for all; the era of reservations was ended, of the thought that “isolation had tended to reinforce and perpetuate Native American culture rather than promote assimilation.”ⁱⁱⁱ For many leaders of the ‘Five-Civilized Tribes’, such as the Cherokee and Creek (Muskogee), this was true; following removal, many tribes re-built themselves in Indian Territory, established sophisticated schools, and strengthened tribal governments. However, in the eyes of the United States, this was not ‘progress’; reservations not only allowed for the continuance of “barbarism” but also locked up desirable land.^{iv} In order to propel Indians “as individuals, into mainstream society,”^v the reservation must be divided. Understandably, many Indians objected to the Dawes Act,

and subsequent Curtis Act.^{vi} Prominent among them were Chitto Harjo ('Crazy Snake' or Wilson Jones) and the 'Snakes', his followers.^{vii} By analyzing reactions to the movements of leaders such as the Creek Chitto Harjo, the 'Snakes', and instances such as the 'Smoked Meat Rebellion' of 1909 as evident in the 1930s WPA "Indian-Pioneer Papers" interviews, it is possible to understand in greater depth the complex issues posed by Allotment policy for tribes in Indian Territory. In so doing, it is also possible to construct an understanding of life, for the Creek tribe especially, in Indian Territory at the time of Allotment, and shortly thereafter. As Allotment particularly attacked the sovereign way of life and traditional land-holding practices in Indian Territory, reactions to Chitto Harjo's rejection of allotment and enrollment illuminate what Indian peoples felt they were losing, and how white settlers felt that Indian peoples should react. Moreover, these interviews elucidate the contours of race relations in Indian Territory at the time of Allotment.

The image that emerges from these interviews is, firstly, that of a small-scale skirmish. Bolster points out that, at the time of the 'Smoked Meat Rebellion' of 1909, Oklahoma newspapers published greatly exaggerated^{viii} but ephemeral stories of an impending Creek uprising, and a mobilizing Creek force, emboldened by a local white population that turned into "one of the most extensive," and short-lived, "manhunts in the history of the nation,"^{ix} following the deaths of two officers. After movements by the 'Snakes' to re-establish tribal government at Hickory Ground at the beginning of the 20th century, the 'Smoked Meat Rebellion' itself, triggered in some accounts by the hostilities of white officers on the grounds of stolen goods, escalated to a shootout between gathering

'Snakes' at Chitto Harjo's cabin. Despite the overwrought newspaper publications, a white interviewee states in 1937 in response to the uprising that "whites didn't pay much attention to the Indian's troubles among themselves. They had their own courts and settled them in their own way," and that furthermore, the incident was "played up chiefly by the newspapers."^x An immigrant from Switzerland, Henry Vogel elaborates that "Chitto Harjo was nick-named Crazy Snake and he was with a number of other crazy Indians that rebelled against the government . . . I might add here that the Indians in eastern Oklahoma were a law abiding and peaceful race and the biggest enemies that we had in the early days was the United States Marshals."^{xi} Another white man, J.W. Scott, however, does admit that out of fear of Chitto Harjo and his band he sent his wife away at night, as the band wanted "to run the whites out of Creek Nation" and that "Chitto Harjo and his followers were against white settlement and no Indian nor freedman could rent his land to a white person. If he did, he was taken out and killed."^{xii} Scott states erroneously, referring to the incidents in 1909, that "several were killed on the Indian side but none on the white side," and expands that he thinks "the Indian side was mostly negroes. I don't think anyone knows where Chitto Harjo died or was buried. *He was a rover among the Indians, trying to keep them against the whites and I don't know where his home was, if he had one* [italics added for emphasis]."^{xiii}

Still another white man, U.S. Deputy Marshall William F. Jones described Harjo as "a well set-up Indian. He was a very personable sort of fellow, keen-eyed and shrewd. . . A son, Thomas Jones, highly educated, was there part of the time." M.C. Hickman, at the same time, accuses Harjo of making "plenty of money out of his scheme. He charged ten

dollars a head to join his band of followers. He took whites, negroes, and a few Indians, mostly negroes. There were about five hundred in the camp at Old Hickory Ground Town,” and Hickman asserts that Harjo would make all these followers Creek Nation, “regardless of color.” Interestingly, a few interviewees of mixed heritage or identified as ‘colored’ also take up this view that “it was a graft on the part of Crazy Snake to make some money more than it was anything else” and even more surprisingly, that the officers went to arrest Harjo for “misleading the people.”^{xiv} Still others, like L.P. Bobo who worked on a party sent to allot land, alleged that it was not Chitto Harjo that was cheating his people, but other “educated and designing allotters who would go to the respective land offices and select land upon which the improvements belonged to their Snake Indian neighbors,” after which “they would then return and advocate strongly the Snake program which in brief was to tear up the railroads, destroy the cities and towns, run all the white and state negroes out of the nation and have the land as long as water ran and grass grow.”^{xv} These allotters sought to allow the “nine-month limitation, from the time they got a certificate to this land, to expire before the Snake Indian could wake up.” WPA interviews with white settlers, therefore, reveal a spectrum of non-Indian perceptions of Chitto Harjo and the ‘Snake’ rejections of Allotment.

Creek Indians themselves displayed a similar array of perceptions of their fellow Creek; nevertheless, most, though not all, seem to have agreed fairly easily that they were against land allotment. In the interview with L.P. Bobo, he notes that it was hard for him to keep an interpreter because “the recalcitrants were so much in earnest that they would persuade our interpreters to leave the field parties, telling them that they, the interpreters,

were traitors to their own people.”^{xvi} The majority of Creek Indians recollect that Chitto Harjo fought the impositions of the United States government, and that the rebellion “was made by the United States government which wanted to make allotment of land.” There appears to exist an attitude among both whites and some Creeks that this fight, however brave, was futile and that Harjo did not want to give up old ways which were on their way out. William Bruner, a Creek born in 1860, was described by his interviewer as “a member of Crazy Snake’s band,” who still allegedly met with fellow band members, “to talk over plans for the future as they still want to be free citizens and live as they did in the early days of the Indian Territory.” The interviewer points out that “he has a costume that is more than 100 years old. He also has a tomahawk pipe and a beaded belt that was made before the Civil War but he is not willing to give them up.”^{xvii} Leo Pinehill, full-blood Creek, and Harjo’s sister Polly Jones Davis, both emphasize Harjo’s struggle for his people. Pinehill tells the anecdote of a medicine man with whom he was well-acquainted, who said “Chitto Harjo was always a speaker for the rights and he always was interested in what he thought would be for the best for his people.” The medicine man claimed to have been present at the ‘Smoked Meat Rebellion’ shootout, and says that when Harjo was shot in the hip, he assisted him and rode with him from place to place trying to heal him; eventually, according to the medicine man, Harjo died of his wound. “His last words to me” says the medicine man, were “were ‘I bid farewell to all my people.”^{xviii} Nonetheless, there are also instances of full-blood creeks, like Charlie Bird, who state that while they do not know much on the situation, “I know I was against Crazy Snake’s plan.”^{xix}

The Creek leader Chitto Harjo, in rejecting the Curtis Act and seeking to defend tribal sovereignty and lands promised by 1830s treaties, sought to preserve a cultural heritage and a way of life. In doing so, he was regarded by many whites -- as well as some of his contemporaries -- as a 'traditionalist full-blood' grappling to preserve a lifestyle that was over, and unrealistic. To label him thusly is to oversimplify; his movement engaged the opinions of full-blood Creeks, members of other tribes, whites, freedmen and those of mixed heritage. As Harjo states in his 1906 address to the U.S. senate, "I have always been asking for justice. I have never asked for anything else but justice. I never had justice." This aim appealed not only to Indians, but to non-Indians as well in their understanding of the movement of Harjo and his 'Snake' followers, even if they did not support his actions. The recollections of interviewees provided by the WPA 'Indian-Pioneer Papers' provide a method of expanding these relationships, and the way that inhabitants of Indian Territory accepted or rejected the policy of Allotment. In the words of Mel H. Bolster: "traditions and customs are the product of many generations' development, and the cultural heritage of centuries is not forgotten as easily as names are written on pieces of paper."^{xx} The "Indian-Pioneer Papers" thus provide a glimpse into Creeks, Indian, whites, and freedmen conceptualizations of Chitto Harjo's rebellion against the United States government Allotment policy and dissolution of tribal sovereignty.

ⁱ Wilkinson, Charles F. *Blood Struggle: the Rise of Modern Indian Nations*. Norton and Company. 2005. 41. In 1934, “when Congress abandoned the allotment policy, tribal landholdings had plummeted to 52 million acres,” from 140 million acres nationwide in 1887. Wilkinson quotes Teddy Roosevelt, for whom allotment was “a mighty pulverizing engine, to break up the tribal mass.”

ⁱⁱ Wickett, Murray R. *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907*. Louisiana State University Press. 2000. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wickett, 49.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Wickett, 51.

^{vi} Wickett, 50.

^{vii} One interviewer, U.S. Deputy Marshal William F. Jones, says that upon receiving a summons to appear before court and explain not showing up for enrollment, Harjo said “All right.” After Jones rode away, he heard from the interpreter that “Harjo had torn the summons up and stomped it in the grounds.” pg. 17

^{viii} Bolster, Mel H. *Crazy Snake and the Smoked Meat Rebellion*. Branden Press. 1976. 51. Bolster quotes General Frank Canton’s response to press: “I am rather of the opinion that some wild newspaper writer has worked off a small sized riot as an Indian war or race war. The only element of danger lies in the fact that sensational writers have caused the excitement and someone may have to do something to keep up the show. . . . From my reports there have been but two killed since the trouble started and those were officers who seem to have had extremely poor judgment.” Unfortunately, one of those officers happened to be the son of the sheriff. It should also not be ruled out that this escalation was not entirely due to attempts to incite the ‘Snake’ band in order to open land. Bolster also quotes the April 3, 1909 issue of *Daily Oklahoma*: “the insurrection of the Crazy Snake band of Creek Indians . . . Will have a tendency to help out the land question on the east side. Dead Indian claims can be sold, you know.”

^{ix} Bolster, 54.

^x Biographical Sketch: Interview with Charles Robertson. Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 77. Pg. 6.

^{xi} Interview with Henry Vogel, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol 93. Pg. 9

^{xii} Interview with J.W. Scott, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 81. Pg. 8

^{xiii} Ibid, pg. 9

^{xiv} Jack Simmons, of mixed Creek, Cherokee, and African heritage. Pg 58. John Harrison confers: “some of the Indians were crazy enough to believe him [Chitto Harjo]. . . . While in fact is was just a get rich quick scheme with Chitto, and of course the law stepped in and took a hand and possibly one or two of the officers and a like number of Indians were killed, but Chitto was arrested and things quieted down and they let him go.” ‘Interview with John Harrison.’ Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 39. Pg 26

^{xv} ‘Interview with L.P. Bobo,’ Indian-Pioneer Papers. Vol. 9. Pg 1. Bobo is citing Chitto Harjo’s 1906 address to the U.S. senate when he says that Harjo wanted these things “as long as water ran and grass grow.”

^{xvi} J.P. Bobo, pg 13.

^{xvii} Bruner, pg. 5

^{xviii} ‘Interview with Leo Pinehill.’ Indian-Pioneer Papers. Vol 71. Pg. 4 Pinehill’s story of the medicine man, Co-ga Chupa does fit somewhat with Bolster’s account of Chitto Harjo’s eventual death in 1913, which was confirmed by interviews with close supporters. It is very interesting to note that many WPA interviews which mentioned Chitto Harjo also speculated about his death, some stating that he joined the Choctaws and lived peacefully, that he moved to Texas, that he moved to Mexico, and that he was killed in 1909.

^{xix} ‘Interview with Charlie Bird.’ Indian-Pioneer Papers. Vol. 8. Pg 6.

^{xx} Bolster, Mel H. *The Smoked Meat Rebellion*. 40.