



TISHOMINGO

(tish-a-minko)

Mary Ruth Hughes



CHICKASAW NATION 1896



Chapter One

*** 1875***

The Chickasaws first came to Indian Territory in the 1830's. They built their Council House at a place they called Good Springs. Good Springs was later renamed Tishomingo in honor of Chief Tishomingo, the last Chickasaw War Chief.

Tishomingo, capital of the Chickasaw Nation, was a quiet community. Main Street was a dirt road with a few wooden buildings lining both sides of the street for two blocks. There was a boarding house, general store, telegraph office and livery stable. The one and only doctor had his office located in his home on east Main. To generate revenue, the Chickasaw Nation required all merchants to pay a fee each year to do business in the Nation.

The biggest event of 1875 was the marriage of John Prichett, a handsome young Chickasaw, and Carrie Odell, the daughter of a wealthy Irish family from St. Louis. John's friend, Gentle Woman, was organizing the celebration. She and John's housekeeper, Rose, had begun to plan the party even before John left for St. Louis.

Gentle Woman and her husband had been John's good friends for years. They had all grown up together. Then just a few months before John and Carrie's wedding celebration, a hunting accident had taken the life of her husband. This unexpected death was made even more tragic because Gentle Woman was with child. John had looked after her ever since. When John traveled back to the Territory with his bride on June 6, 1875, Gentle Woman was expecting her baby to be born any day.

A few days before their arrival, several men who were helping with the event killed a deer, butchered a pig and a steer. They dug a big open pit and built a roaring fire. When the burning

wood turned into coals, wet gunnysacks full of meat were lowered into the pit. Dirt was thrown on top and the meat baked in this underground oven until time to be eaten.

The men had also constructed a framework of wood, covered it with green branches to shade the wedding party and built a platform for the couple to stand on. Several other brush arbors were built to shade the tables and benches for the feast.

The day John and Carrie arrived, the smell of roasting meats permeated the air. The pashofa was being stirred constantly as it slowly simmered in an iron kettle that hung from a tripod above hot coals. The crowd arrived early and lined the road up to the cabin John called Okla Chuka, a mile north of town. Many people waited to greet the bride and groom.

"Ples! Stop here!" John shouted when they neared the cabin.

"We'll walk the rest of the way. We've been sitting too long and need to stretch our legs."

"Where did all these people come from, John?" Carrie asked as John lifted her from the buggy.

"This is Gentle Woman's planning," he said, taking a quick look at the crowd. "And how like her to invite everyone in the whole Territory! Come, I want to introduce you to her."

Gentle Woman was stirring the black cast-iron pot of pashofa when John and Carrie approached her.

"Carrie, I would like you to meet Gentle Woman, a dear friend."

"Gentle Woman, I have heard so many good things about you from John. He tells me that you are expecting a baby any day. How in the world do you have the energy to put on such a lavish affair in your condition?"

"No sense in pampering oneself. It is best to stay busy."

"It is so nice of you to invite all these people to a welcome home party."

"Actually, it is also to show the younger generation how we conducted a Chickasaw wedding ceremony in the old days, as well as a welcome home party." Gentle Woman smiled at them both.

"Oh my, how exciting!" Carrie exclaimed.

"Come to the house, Carrie; I have something for you." Gentle Woman directed a person standing nearby to take over

the stirring of the pashofa and led Carrie to the small log cabin that John had built a few years ago for himself.

“Come on in,” Gentle Woman said as she held the door open for Carrie to step inside. There on a wooden bench was a package wrapped in brown paper.

Gentle Woman handed it to Carrie. “This is for you. I hope it fits.”

Carrie eagerly opened the package to see an ankle-length dress, handmade from green and yellow calico. At the hemline of the skirt hung a few tin cones. These were to represent the turtle shell leggings worn in years past by Chickasaw women at dance rituals.

“This is magnificent! I have never seen a traditional Indian dress before. And look at this beautiful beaded headpiece with earrings and a necklace to match!”

Gentle Woman was pleased that Carrie liked the gifts. “And here is a pair of moccasins that belong to me but they are yours to wear for the ceremony.”

Carrie sat down on a short bench to unbutton her high-topped riding shoes. She squished her toes to make her feet fit in the small moccasins. She didn’t dare say a word for fear of insulting Gentle Woman.

“Try the dress on and let me see if it fits,” Gentle Woman said, leading Carrie to a dressing screen set up in one corner of the room.

As Carrie was changing, Gentle Woman continued, “I also made John a ribbon shirt to match your dress.”

John came into the room wearing his ribbon shirt, a turban and an eagle claw necklace just as Carrie stepped from behind the dressing screen wearing the ceremonial dress that fit every curve of her body perfectly.

“Carrie, you could pass for a full-blood if it weren’t for your white skin,” John said appreciatively as he surveyed her.

“And I didn’t know I married such a handsome Indian!” Carrie returned with a smile. She gracefully danced and pirouetted around John, causing the tin cones to swirl and sway. They continued making tinkling noises long after she stopped to give him a kiss.

Gentle Woman watched the two with pleasure.

“Perhaps you two should go out to mingle with the crowd for awhile,” Gentle Woman suggested.

John was proud of Carrie. He led her around, introducing her to his friends who were all so friendly that Carrie felt welcome and at ease with everyone.

After she’d met nearly everyone present, Ples approached the happy couple to tell them it was time for the wedding celebration to begin.

“John, give me time to get to my seat before you and Carrie walk down the path.” A massively pregnant Gentle Woman took Ples’ arm and he carefully guided her to a vacant bench among the seated guests.

When John and Carrie walked toward the brush arbor they heard the beating of tribal drums. As part of the wedding procession, Simon Rabbit served as “Keeper of the Panther.” He stepped in front of the couple holding aloft a black panther skin. He motioned for them to follow, then placed the skin on the platform in front of Moses Creek. Moses, with his Indian prayer book in his hand, stood in front of the Great Seal of the Chickasaw Nation which hung behind him from a log beam supporting the brush arbor.

John and Carrie stood side by side on the panther skin, facing Moses. He acknowledged them by repeating their names.

Speaking in his native tongue, Moses explained how Chickasaw marriages were performed in the past. Carrie and a few of the guests didn’t understand Chickasaw so Gentle Woman asked an English-speaking friend to translate the story for them.

“We come here as friends to celebrate John and Carrie’s marriage. As they begin their journey together, we wish them a long, prosperous and fruitful life of love, devotion and happiness.”

After the short speech, Moses concluded with a prayer. John kissed his bride. They turned and walked to the long feast tables that were beautifully decorated with an array of greenery, corn, gourds and feathers. They were followed by the “Keeper of the Panther” and accompanied by softly beating drums.

John took his handkerchief and wiped a tear from Carrie's cheek.

"I have never been so moved," Carrie managed to say. She couldn't find the words to truly describe how all of this had profoundly touched her.

"Now I feel I really am Mrs. John Prichett."

The venison, beef and pork filled two large tables. Fresh cooked vegetables covered another. Oddly shaped fry bread cooked in an old iron wash pot was served one piece at a time to the patient crowd. The pashofa was dished directly from the big black pot in which it had been cooked. Several men sat circling a large rawhide drum. With their drum sticks in hand, they kept a steady rhythm while flute players and singers filled the air with traditional songs.

It was twenty minutes past midnight when Gentle Woman summoned John to her side.

"Will you walk me to the house? I'm having labor pains."

John rushed back to get Carrie. Together, they helped the expectant mother walk to the house. John immediately sent for Granny Creek, Moses' mother. Most of the babies born in Tishomingo were delivered either by her or by Gentle Woman.

They helped her climb into the large bed. As soon as she was settled comfortably, Gentle Woman reached for her black bag which contained herbal medicines. She took out a small bottle and sipped the crimson liquid. Then she took out an eagle feather and gripped it tightly in her right hand. This had a calming effect on her. She uttered only a few muffled sounds throughout the rest of her labor. Granny Creek arrived, checked the baby's progress and kept Gentle Woman as comfortable as possible. A few hours later, after a relatively short labor, on June 7, 1875, Gentle Woman gave birth to a son.

When the baby emerged, Gentle Woman raised herself up and touched him softly. As soon as Granny Creek severed the cord, she laid the baby on top of Gentle Woman who cradled her son tenderly. After resting a short time, Gentle Woman bathed the newborn herself with special oil and anointed his head with corn pollen taken from a small leather pouch. She then dressed the child in a long drawstring gown, one of many

she had sewn by hand during the nine-month pregnancy. Her face was radiant in the glow of the candles as she held her son and looked at his small face, so reminiscent of his father's.

Carrie had gone to get John who was waiting outside the cabin, and together they tiptoed back into the room just as Granny Creek was putting the afterbirth in a safe place to dry. This was something both she and Gentle Woman did when attending a birth.

"What is she doing with the placenta?" Carrie whispered to John.

"This is tradition," he explained. "Chickasaws believe a long and healthy life is possible only if one keeps all their body parts. Granny Creek will dry it and it will go in his medicine bag."

Gentle Woman named her son Jordan.

"But he must have a tribal name," she said, as Carrie lifted the baby into John's arms.

"Little man, you sure were in a hurry to come into this world. Did you quietly soar in on the wings of an eagle?" He continued to question the child, looking at his tiny face thoughtfully.

After several moments of silence, John spoke, "Gentle Woman, we will call him Osi Ilefenachi."

The mother smiled lovingly as she looked at little baby Jordan, who was given the tribal name of Osi Ilefenachi: Proud Eagle.

For three weeks Carrie helped Gentle Woman care for baby Osi. Then she and John accompanied them both back to their ranch. John wanted to hire a woman to help her but Gentle Woman insisted she was fine alone. John and Carrie left Gentle Woman and Osi at their ranch and drove the buggy back to Tishomingo.

"It's going to be lonesome at Okla Chuka without baby Osi," Carrie said wistfully.

"Then let's have a baby of our own," John replied at once.

"Yes! It'll be a baby boy – as pretty as little Osi."