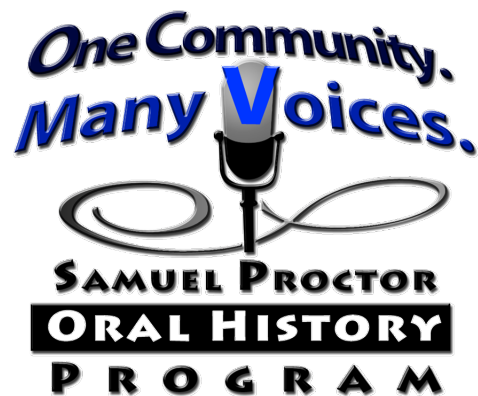


Jasper Henry

Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-002

Interview by:

John K. Mahon
December 3, 1973



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MISS CHOC 002 Jasper Henry
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38 minutes | 23 pages

Abstract: Jasper Henry discusses his and his children's education, and his decision to send his son to a White school in Neshoba County. He recalls his training as a watchmaker and remembers his difficulty finding work. He lists what members of his family can speak English and/or Choctaw, and then describes his seven years of service in the army. He landed in Normandy on D-Day. Finally, he tries to recall elements of Choctaw history and religion.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi--Choctaw; Military participation; Oral biography]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

MISS CHOC 002

Interviewee: Jasper Henry

Interviewer: John K. Mahon

Date of Interview: December 3, 1973

M: We're holding a little trial interview here with Mr. Jasper Henry of the Choctaw Tribe. And this is Monday afternoon of a beautiful Monday at 3:17 on December 3. And Mr. Henry and I are sitting on the stage in the Choctaw Central School?

H: That's right.

M: Making this little recording. Now, Mr. Henry, would you just please say your name again, so you have said it, and then when you were born.

H: My name is Jasper Henry, and I was born on August 20, 1917.

M: Were you born in this area?

H: I was born at what they call **Beatfire** back out in this part of the country back here. 'Course I think that's still in Neshoba County. And I have been raised in Neshoba County. Of course, I had my father and mother then, we moved around here and there. And we also moved to Winston County for a couple of years or so before they moved back in Neshoba County. And while I was little, we been living on a sharecropper to the White people. And in my community where I'm living now, **they call it**, built up a school there in ... I think it was about 1930 or somewhere along in there, maybe a little bit later. And I was pretty well grown-up kid then, somewhere around fourteen years old. That's when I went to school there. And I finished ... well, actually I don't know whether I finished or not, but I went to sixth grade, they considered, and they sent me to Cherokee, North Carolina.

M: How'd that happen?

H: Well, at that time, within the vicinity, Choctaws didn't have no higher school than sixth grade. That was just the highest they had was sixth grade, you know. And so, if there was anybody wanted to go any farther in their education, well, they had to go to Oklahoma or to Cherokee at that time.

M: What you're saying is they were not admitted to the White schools?

H: That's right, yeah.

M: Now, have you got children in school now?

H: I have one in the school.

M: Where? At this school here?

H: No, he's in a White school up here at Neshoba Central.

M: I see. How did it happen you elected to put him in that instead of this school here?

H: Well, what happened was that I also been moving around too, you see. I went to Cincinnati, Ohio, and lived there for about ten years. And me and my wife had separated, and she took my kids and came back home. And when I did come back, well, I couldn't find no place to make a home for my children, you know. So, they were kind of here and there, most of them. But now they are over here at [inaudible 4:33] in this area, Pearl River, and one of them that's a boy is with Grandmother, and he's the one that's going to school at the Neshoba Central.

M: How's he find it in that school? Is it all right with him? Is he getting along okay?

H: Yeah, I think he's doing fine.

M: He enjoys it and all that?

H: Yeah. Of course, one handicap that he has, which he will have it all his life, but when he was a little boy, about five years old—no, about four years old, I guess—they found a tumor back in one of his eyes. So, they had to operate on him. They took one of his eyes out, you know. And that's why he's one eye, and I think that's think going be one of the kind of a handicap that he'll have for all his life.

M: Now, Mr. Henry, in that connection, in the removal of his eye and all that sickness, what doctors did that work?

H: Well, these were eye doctors, and this happened in Cincinnati also.

M: In Cincinnati?

H: Yeah. And they had a hospital over there for children—Children's Hospital, they called it, see. **When any** little children get sick or something like that, why, we usually take those children to the Hospital, for check-up and things like that. And while we was doing that, that was time that they found out. Well, actually, her mother happened to find or notice something was wrong with him. So, she actually found out that he was blind on one eye. He didn't notice it, see. So, well, we kind of looked into it a little bit. He was kind of blind, so therefore we had to take him to the hospital over there. That's when they decided that he had a tumor. Of course, I don't know what his doctor's name or anything.

M: No, I wasn't thinking of that, but I was really thinking, you weren't in an Indian community, were you?

H: No.

M: Well, are these men charging you for this cost?

H: No, they—

M: Or was it ...?

H: They're charging me, but this—not Red Cross ...

M: Blue Cross?

H: Yeah, Blue Cross.

M: You were carrying this type insurance.

H: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

M: So that took care of it?

H: Uh-huh, that took care of it ... paid the whole thing.

M: Well, you didn't have any problem with medical attention because you were Indian?

H: No, not far as—

M: Did they know you were Indian?

H: Yeah. Of course, we had almost full history with us—that is, not on us, but they had it over there because they had ... the office didn't want me to have to send it over because we was going over there on the relocation business, see.

M: Well, now, I didn't pick up in the discussion with you before. What were you doing in Cincinnati?

H: Oh, well, actually, I was trained in horology business ...

M: In what?

H: In horology.

M: Horology?

H: Yeah.

M: Telling ... predicting from the stars, or what is horology?

H: No. Uh ...

M: Oh, watches! Watches.

H: Mmhm. Making 'em—

M: Where'd you get trained in that?

H: I got that training at Jones County Junior College.

M: Is Jones County Mississippi?

H: Yeah. Mmhm. And that's where I got that, and I had two years of it. Thought I might get a job around here, but you know how the White people was at that time, and, well, I couldn't very well get along with it. So, first chance I had, I thought I might do better by going other place, you know, because I'd seen it done before, you know, like if I had to go to New York, or maybe—just so it was out of Mississippi. Well, I could mingle along with the White people then, see. So, I just went over there, and they said there was a lot of businesses and things like that going over there, you know, in the watch business. So, I decided to go there. But come to find out there wasn't nothing over there open as a horology business, you know.

M: So, what did you do?

H: So, I thought I'd go around and work around a little bit, and I finally wound up in a heating business for a while. [Laughter] Because of the **clean there**, I worked with some—I forgot this. The company that I worked with was—well, it was just a small little old company. It was for the handicapped people, you know. I wasn't that all handicapped, but they put me in there. Well, the reason why they had me for handicapped at that time, in [19]53 I was operated on for tuberculosis, which I

had developed in 1948. And I had that, kind of bothered me all along, so they had to operate on me. In [19]53, I think it was. Since then, every time I mention that, everybody seemed to be kinda a little curious about it, see.

M: Well, now—

H: Actually, at that time, actually they had my name down as a disabled veteran, you know and like that. So, I couldn't get no heavy job, all except just easy, like I said, watch-making or something like that, just setting around. I could tinker with a little bit [inaudible 12:20] of like that. That was good. And, well, I couldn't find anything like that to do in Cincinnati, so therefore, I wound up in the, just like I said, this little old company there. Paid fifty cents an hour. I couldn't make no living on—

M: Fifty cents an hour? What year was that, more or less?

H: Oh, let's see. I think it was in [19]58.

M: Were they paying you the same rate as other people were getting?

H: Yeah.

M: The going rate was fifty cents an hour?

H: Well, actually, just like I begin there. They start you from fifty cents and then go up to a dollar, maybe a dollar and a half.

M: So how long did you spend around Cincinnati, in all?

H: Oh, I spent about eleven years.

M: But then you're altogether removed from the Tribe. You aren't having anything to do with them, are you, at this time? Or are you?

H: At this time? Yeah—

M: During that eleven years, I mean.

H: Well, during that eleven years—

M: While you were in Cincinnati.

H: I was just ... I didn't have nothing to do with the Tribe or anything, you know. I was just out there. 'Course, anybody'd been there, Tribal don't think that they are throwing you out or anything, you know. You can go as you please. You stay as long as you please. And you can always come back.

M: Are you a full-blooded Choctaw?

H: That's right.

M: But you moved—

H: Wait a minute now, wait a minute. I don't think I'm quite full.

M: But you're mostly?

H: Yeah, mostly Indian.

M: Choctaw.

H: Of course, I have some relatives. I think my mother was half ... I think she was a half-Indian.

M: And what, half-White?

H: Mmhm, uh-huh. Half Indian and half White. And my grandmother, she was full White. And all the rest of that, why, they're ... she had some mostly White blood in her, you know. Of course, my daddy, I think he was full-blooded. But someone told me that, I should remember, we weren't full-blooded. Maybe about eighth White, you know ...

M: Was Choctaw your first tongue? First language?

H: Yeah.

M: I mean, did you grow up as a child speaking Choctaw naturally first?

H: No, not necessarily. I had both of 'em. [Laughter]

M: Did you?

H: Yeah. 'Cause, see, the reason for that was that my mother and sisters and also my father—my father mostly—well, as I born and came up, why, they can all speak English. Well, not all that good, but everybody can understand, you know. So, they talked to me in Choctaw, talked to me in English, so I just gradually picked it up from both sides. It came up.

M: Are you still a Choctaw speaker?

H: Huh?

M: Are you still a Choctaw speaker? You can still talk it?

H: Yeah. Most of the time, I think I would rather kinda speak in the Choctaw language.

M: You would.

H: Yeah. Because—

I: Why do you—

H: Well, in certain cases, I would like to speak in English. Now, for instance, like some of the Bible interpretations, you know, in the Sunday School ... but of course, I don't teach or anything like that. When someone asks me to try to explain something like that, it seem like ... well, I mostly study Bible in the English language, you know. And it seem like I understand that better than I would my own native tongue of Bible written.

M: Is the Bible translated into Choctaw?

H: Yeah.

M: And you can read Choctaw, can you?

H: Yeah.

M: Can you write it?

H: No, I can't write it. Of course, I could if I just sat down and study and things like that, well, I imagine I could write and, you know, I like to try to do that.

M: Do you talk Choctaw at home?

H: Yes.

M: And within your family?

H: Yeah. Well, in fact, like within my sisters and brothers, why, I usually use both of them. And they use both of them. We just talk ... well, just like, you know, if you was Choctaw and you speak English to me, well, I would talk Choctaw back to you, you know. We'd both understand, same thing.

M: You don't have any problem shifting from one of the languages to the other, huh?

H: No.

M: No problem?

H: No.

M: Well, now—

H: But that's is—among individuals, see. Of course. There is some that they can't shift around like I can. 'Course, a lot of them they know the Choctaw language very good, and they don't know the English dialect too well or something like that. They just can't speak one ... speak a few words of English and just come right

over and speak Choctaw just like that, you know. But they have no problem doing it.

M: Are your parents, either of them, alive?

H: No, not anymore.

M: Have you got any old relatives? I mean, an earlier generation than you?

H: Let's see. I have a few of them that's on my mother's side.

M: Well now, can they speak English?

H: Mmhm.

M: Or they just speak Choctaw?

H: Yeah, they're the ones that can ... I got one, an uncle, I think. Now, he can speak mostly English and ... well, he can speak Choctaw pretty good, but not as well as some of these Choctaws can. 'Course, he says he's Choctaw, but I just call him half-Choctaw, you know. He's the one that—well, my grandmother's son, I think. And my grandfather, he was half-White, so therefore he was more of a White fellow than a Indian, you know. But he always associated with the Indians and the Whites, it just didn't make no difference.

M: Well now, you spent eleven years around Cincinnati, and moving in the White society.

H: Yeah.

M: And what prompted you to come back to Mississippi, where at one time they wouldn't even let you in the schools?

H: I don't know why. I guess I just got tired of it, and I thought probably I might be able to do better at that time.

M: Got a little crackle in this. You can hear it.

H: And so, I just made up my mind.

M: But you were making a living, were you, at the time?

H: Well, it was kinda hard. About the same as I'm doing now, just as barely making ends meet.

M: What are you working at now?

H: I'm not working anywhere right now.

M: Oh, you're not.

H: No.

M: You're not employed by the Tribe or anything?

H: No.

M: I see. Well, you can ... could you still repair watches?

H: Well, if I had the tools, I can. I think I can.

M: You don't have the tools for it?

H: No.

M: Well, listen, you spoke to me about being a veteran. Did I understand you right?
Did you have some military service?

H: Mmhm.

M: When, World War II?

H: Yeah.

M: Oh, I see. Were Choctaws subject to conscription? How'd you get in—what were you in? Army or Navy or—

H: Army.

M: And how'd you get in it?

H: Well, I was drafted.

M: Oh, the Choctaws were draftable, were they?

H: Well, I guess they were, 'cause I think some of these Choctaws in Mississippi were drafted. Of course, I got in through the Cherokee Agency. [Laughter] I was in school at that time.

M: And they were drafted up there, were they, the Cherokee?

H: Well, some were drafted, and some of them just volunteered.

M: Yeah.

H: Of course, I guess there's some law on that deal, but Cherokees were draftable, you know.

M: Well, how about Choctaws? Were they?

H: Yeah, I think they was the same.

M: I don't think they ever enforced it against the Seminoles in Florida. I really don't think they did.

H: Well, a lot of people have said that the Indians aren't supposed to be drafted or anything like that. If they want to go they should go in voluntarily.

M: Well, how long did you put in in the military service?

H: Well, about seven and a half years.

M: Seven and a half! So, you stayed after the war a while.

H: Yeah. Well, I was intending to stay in—

M: And complete a full—

H: Yeah, a full term.

M: What happened? You got tuberculosis?

H: Yeah, that's what—

M: Where'd that come from? Did you get it in the service?

H: Well, I picked it up somewhere while I was in the service. Of course, though, I have an idea where I picked it up. I was stationed at Fitzsimons General Hospital, Colorado. And I was working in the hospital, 'cause I just came from Korea at the time, and I relocated in Colorado. I was working in the hospital, Fitzsimons Hospital, the TB ward. So, I come in contact with a lot of these TB patients, so I figured that that's just about where I picked it up.

M: Were you ever shipped overseas during the war?

H: Yeah.

M: I mean, World War II?

H: Yeah.

M: Where'd you go?

H: I went to Europe.

M: Oh, did you?

H: Yeah. I went to Europe ... well, I stayed around England, I guess about six months. And then **around this, I think it was** June 6, [19]44, I think it was.

M: D-Day?

H: Yeah.

M: Yeah!

H: I was in that.

M: Were you?

H: Yeah.

M: What were you, an infantry soldier or what?

H: Field artillery.

M: Oh, you were?

H: Yeah.

M: What kind of cannon?

H: 105 howitzers.

M: I see. With an infantry division?

H: Well, I was in the army—what do you call it?

M: Army artillery?

H: Yeah.

M: So you weren't part of a division.

H: No.

M: But you crossed on D-Day, did you?

H: Yeah.

M: Well, how about that? Any problems getting ashore? Did you have any—?

H: Well, this field artillery outfit, they didn't have too much of a problem.

M: You got ashore without much of a scrap?

H: Yeah, 'cause, see, this infantry and the other troops had already went through there and shoved everything out—you know, just made a way for us to get in there. And so, after we got on the beachhead there, we were on in—

M: What was the beachhead? Do you remember what they called it?

H: Uh, Normandy beachhead.

M: It was Normandy.

H: And well, I think that Saint-Lô was on our—the way I figure it was on our right at that time.

M: Were you a cannoneer?

H: Yeah.

M: Were you on the guns?

H: Mmhm. I was working as Number One, you know.

M: Oh, you were? Did you find that interesting?

H: Yeah, I got very interested.

M: I served with the 105 howitzers, too. I was with a tank outfit. Do you know what the M-7 was?

H: Yeah.

M: It was a self-propelled—

H: Yeah.

M: Well, I was in a battalion of those. And you were probably with the truck-drawn.

H: Yeah, just what you called a carriage.

M: Yeah. Well now, have you got a military disability pension or something? You get something for this?

H: Yeah, mmhm.

M: I see.

H: Yeah. They started me off at a hundred percent, but eventually they cut me down.

M: What grade did you advance to in the Army?

H: What grade?

M: I mean, were you a corporal, a sergeant, or a staff sergeant?

H: I went up to staff sergeant.

M: Did you?

H: Of course, that was on my second hitch when I picked that up.

M: And do I understand you went to Korea too?

H: Yeah.

M: Were you in action, in combat, in Korea?

H: No, I wasn't in the action or anything like that while in Korea. I just—

M: You were too old by that time, I guess.

H: I was just happy, I was just lucky enough to get out of that, see.

M: What kind of outfit were you in at that time? Hospital corps?

H: The 58th Reconnaissance Troop.

M: I see.

H: Yeah, they ... I didn't know why they had a 58th Reconnaissance, they called it. But they had organized two reconnaissance outfits down there while they were down there, you know. So, they called one 56th Reconnaissance Troop, and one 58th Reconnaissance Troop, you know. So, I was in that 58th Reconnaissance Troop. Of course, I was in the camp area all the time, so we had no problem there—of course, we was kind of aware of it, but nothing happened. So many guys had decided to come back, so they asked me if I wanted to come back. I said to myself, I signed up for stateside duty on my second hitch, so I decided to just come on back, you know. I came back.

M: Well, was there anything special about being an Indian in the U.S. Army? I mean, did you have any sense of especially being any different than anybody else?

H: No.

M: They call you "Chief" or anything?

H: Well, they called me "Chief," but mostly they called me by my name and rank if I had it, you know. [Laughter]

M: Yeah. So you didn't feel in any way set apart?

H: Well, you know yourself how they usually do. And all together, they'll call you anything they want to, you know. And you can call them, too. I was just the same thing. They'd call me anything.

M: Well now, you talked a minute ago about studying the Bible in English. You are a Christian, are you?

H: Yes.

M: And a regular attendant and so on?

H: Yeah.

M: Is this common? I mean, are most of the Choctaws you know Christians, or have any of them retained whatever the native faith was?

H: Well, some of them seem to retain their own old traditional ways. And, well, it got where a majority of them began to understand what Christian is and began to understand what benefit they can get from being a Christian and all of that, so I think that the Christian way of living is in most of the Indian people.

M: What church do you belong to?

H: The Baptist.

M: Are most of the Choctaws Baptist, or is it fair to say that?

H: Well, most of the Choctaw people on this reservation, I'd say, is a Baptist, Baptist people. Of course we got some Catholics, and got some ... what do you call it ...

M: Seventh-Day—well, no. Mormons?

H: No, uh ...

M: Congregational? Presbyterian? Methodist?

H: Well, yeah, they had some Methodist, but I don't know whether they still got. I forget.

M: Church of Christ?

H: No, not—

M: Not them.

H: Let me see. What's the next church that's Christ?

M: I don't know.

H: Let's see. I know there's one more, but I ...

M: Well, do the Choctaws still have any ceremonials once a year or so that would hark back to the earlier Indian methods?

H: Lacking a yearly event or anything like that. They don't much have anything like that nowadays. All except like during the fair here. That's about the only thing that they participate in, you know. Just some of the old ways of dancing and ball game, things like that.

M: Are there still some people that know these?

H: Yeah.

M: I mean, they know the dances and so on? Well, the Creeks had what they called the Green Corn Dance. Once a year at the ripening of the corn or something. Did the Choctaws, within your memory, ever have any ceremony of that kind?

H: No. I don't believe ... no, I don't think so. They might have it, but I don't believe I remember any such ceremonies like that.

M: Did the Choctaws at some time function in clans? You know, Wolf Clan, Bear Clan, like this? Have you ever encountered that?

H: No.

M: Not familiar with that at all. In the Creek and Seminole cultures, the clans were a factor, and they still are. You never had anything of this kind in your background at all that you recall?

H: No.

M: Well, that's interesting. Well, one more little point. Have you ever studied the history of your people to any degree at all?

H: No. All except just a few things that some older people tell me, just a little bit here and there. And of that, I couldn't remember—

M: I mean, do you remember—were you ever told by any of your grandparents or anything, anyone, what would be called a Choctaw legend? A story of Choctaw origins, or anything like this? As a boy, did anybody ever tell you this kind of thing?

H: No, never have.

M: Not familiar with them.

H: No.

M: I'm not asking you to embarrass you, but just—

H: Yeah, I know!

M: I mean, do you happen to know the names of any very famous Choctaw Chiefs in the days when the Tribe was big and powerful?

H: Let's see...

M: I just—

H: Oh! Pushmataha!

M: Pushmataha, yeah.

H: He was the one that was the outstanding chief.

M: That is right. Do you know anything about him except his name?

H: No, but ... The only thing I know is that he was trying to lead his people in the right way, that I understood. I don't know, but they were such a small group.

M: Well, there must have been a pretty good-sized number of Choctaws back in the early days. I don't know what the population was. But have you ever visited any of the Choctaws in Oklahoma? There's a very substantial group up there, too, you know. Have you ever been to the Oklahoma reservations?

H: No, never have.

M: Never have.

H: Well, a lot of people have been going back and forth to Oklahoma, but, well, you know, it seems like—I'm a lucky guy about going places like that, you know.

M: Well, you've been around the world pretty much, though, having been in the Army.

H: [Laughter] Yeah.

M: Did you ever get to the West Coast of the United States? Have you ever been to California?

H: Just a little while.

M: But you've been out there.

H: Yeah.

M: So you've been pretty much over the United States?

H: Yeah. Well, I was stationed out there at the state of Vermont for a while, you know. Just went in the service, and the time was, I think it was December seventh I was over there, when this Pearl Harbor happened, you know?

M: Oh, is that so?

H: Yeah, I was in Vermont. And, well, I've been around Washington state, **served** on through there. And I've been in San Francisco, that's where I landed when I come back, you know.

M: Have you ever been in my state of Florida?

H: No. That's one of the states I haven't been in.

M: One of the gentlemen out there had gone down there and picked vegetables for pay, you know. They have a big crop every year. I forget which one it was, but he'd been down there, seasonally, and picked vegetables and then come back up. I forget which one of them it was.

H: It's Charlie Denson, I think. He's the one that was telling you—

M: Who?

H: Charlie Denson.

M: Yeah, I believe it was, too.

H: That's the one.

M: I forgot to ask you, which one of these communities do you come from around here?

H: Community?

M: Well, the—

H: Bogue Chitto.

M: Bogue Chitto, that's where you're from?

H: Yeah.

M: I see. Well, it'll save you the drive up from there tomorrow because it won't be necessary to come back.

H: No.

M: Well, I think it's getting time for you to go. And so, I'm gonna shut this.

[End of interview]

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