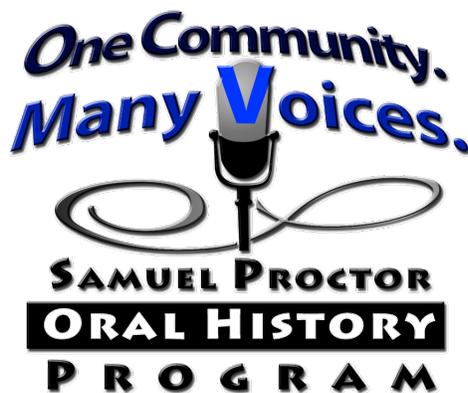


Sarah Jane Simpson McMillan

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-009**

Interview by:

**Dr. Samuel Proctor
December 2, 1973**



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MISS CHOC 009 Sarah Jane Simpson McMillan
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1 hour, 6 minutes | 47 pages

Abstract: Sarah Jane Simpson McMillan moved to Mississippi from her family's home state of Oklahoma, and she struggled with the changes in the new environment. She discusses the differences of religion, holidays, language, social interactions, and child-rearing that deeply impacted her emotions and ability to form community. She explains local Christmas traditions. She also discusses the complicated negotiation Mississippi Choctaw people have with White people in the community.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi--Choctaw; Communities; Religion]

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ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

MISS CHOC 009

Interviewee: Sarah Jane Simpson McMillan

Interviewer: Dr. Samuel Proctor

Interview: December 2, 1973

P: Mrs. Sarah Jane Simpson McMillan. We're at the high school on the Choctaw reservation at Pearl River community here in Mississippi. It's ten minutes after three, Monday, December 2. Part of the Choctaw Indian Oral History Program. How do they call you, is it Sarah Jane?

M: Yes.

P: Let's talk a little bit about you and—Sarah Jane, we're doing this interview this afternoon, and I want to talk to you a little bit about yourself and your family and your past. First of all, let's get some biographical data. Where were you born?

M: Ardmore, Oklahoma.

P: Ardmore, Oklahoma. And what's the date of your birth?

M: January 16, 1951.

P: Are you a Choctaw?

M: Yes.

P: How did it happen that you were born in Ardmore?

M: I lived in Ardmore. My husband went to school in Oklahoma, and we went there, and I came back over here with him and—

P: How did you happen to be born in Oklahoma?

M: My parents lived there.

P: Your parents were living there?

M: Yes, uh-huh.

P: That's the point I want to make. What was your father doing?

M: My father was a grocery store attendant, and he always been an attendant all his life.

P: He was an attendant?

M: Yes. He'd had a gas station with that grocery store and this lady that ran it was his best friend, so he helped her run the store.

P: Now your family had always lived in Oklahoma?

M: Yes.

P: The Choctaw reservation in Oklahoma?

M: No, there is no reservation.

P: There is no reservation among the Choctaw.

M: No, we lived on our own land.

P: A farm outside of Ardmore?

M: No, it's just a country east of Ardmore.

P: Your father was a Choctaw?

M: Yes.

P: What about your mother?

M: My mother is also a Choctaw.

P: So, you're a full-blooded Indian?

M: Yes.

P: What was your mother's name?

M: Cora Sampson.

P: Cora Sampson. I notice your middle name though is "Simpson." Is that right?

M: No. My maiden name is "Sampson."

P: S-A-M-P—

M: S-O-N.

P: S-O-N. Now tell me again your father's name?

M: **Arman** Sampson

P: And your mother's name?

M: Cora Henry Sampson.

P: Henry was her maiden name?

M: Yes.

P: That's what I wanted to make sure I had that—all the family names listed in here. Had her family always lived also in Oklahoma?

M: Yes. Wait just a minute. My grandmother's a Mississippi Choctaw. They came up there during the Trail of Tears or something like that.

P: Did you know your grandmother?

M: Yes.

P: Did she ever tell you anything about this?

M: She never did talk about anything during her past 'cause she was real young when this happened. And she never remembered anything.

P: But she herself was born in Mississippi and had gone west?

M: Yes.

P: When the Choctaws were moved there. So, her memories were of Oklahoma?

M: Mhmm.

P: Tell me about your memories of Oklahoma. You grew up there and was married there.

M: Well, to me, Oklahoma is paradise compared to here, and there it's open and you can do anything you want to, which is, here, it seems to be limited. I mean you can't go and socialize with other people like you can over there.

P: You had no problems at all in growing up? You were not aware of Indian discrimination?

M: No, I wasn't.

P: Were you aware of being an Indian?

M: Yes, I was. We were proud Indians because there, White people thought of you as an Indian and were proud that you attended school with them and they recognized Indians, any Tribe. But here I've noticed that they don't.

P: Now you were graduated from both elementary and high school there?

M: Yes.

P: What was the name of your school in Ardmore?

M: The school I went to the eleventh grade was Dickson High School, which was only quarter mile from where we lived. And my senior year I went to Oklahoma Sequoyah High School; it's an Indian school. And I went there and graduated there.

P: Now your school that you attended up through the eleventh grade was not an Indian school?

M: No, it's a public school.

P: Were there Indian teachers?

M: Only one.

P: Was there any effort made to teach you Indian history in the public school?

M: We had Oklahoma history, which did consist of Choctaw and Cherokee, Navahos—Five Civilized Tribes, history.

P: So, you grew up knowing something about the Choctaw past in Oklahoma?

M: Yes, uh-huh.

P: And it was a past that you were proud of?

M: Yes.

P: In your own home were there any things that were significantly Indian, or significantly Choctaw?

M: No, we grew up living with, socializing with the White people, so everything we done were done according to the White people.

P: What church did your family belong to?

M: We attended the Dillard Baptist Church, which was an Indian church.

P: What do you mean by an "Indian church"?

M: Uh, consists of all Indians, although White people were welcome. Members were Choctaw.

P: Was the service in Indian?

M: Sometimes, yes.

P: Did you grow up knowing the language?

M: Yes.

P: Your family spoke it in the house?

M: Yes. Uh-huh.

P: So, you were bilingual then?

M: Yes.

P: Was there any bilingual activities going on in school?

M: No, there wasn't. Any kind of activities there was it was same thing White people does all the time—basketball—

P: Was your minister at this Baptist church an Indian?

M: Yes, he was. But I think he was Chickasaw, but he was the pastor there. We changed every so often.

P: Are you an only child?

M: No, I'm not. I have three sisters and one brother.

P: Sarah Jane, tell me about your husband. You said you met him in Ardmore. What was he doing there?

M: Well, my sister went to training school in Cleveland, Ohio. And she met this man from Tucker, and—

P: What kind of a training school?

M: It was secretarial training. And she met this Choctaw from here, Mississippi, and she met—

P: In Cleveland?

M: Yes, in Cleveland. And when they met, they went together 'til they got married and about five years later they came to Ardmore, and my husband is my brother-in-law's cousin.

P: I see.

M: So, they brought him down there, for as a chauffeur or something like that. And we met during that time. And three years later, he came to the school I was going to at Tahlequah. And this is where we really got together.

P: This was in your senior year?

M: Yes, uh-huh.

P: Was he in school also?

M: Yes, he went to school over there.

P: So, he's your same age? Approximately your same age?

M: Yes, he's a year older than I am.

P: Uh-huh. And he was graduated from this Indian school across—

M: No, he didn't graduate. I think he was a year behind me. It seems that he was put back one year because of the schools they had here.

P: But he was a Mississippi Choctaw?

M: Yes, he is.

P: So, what is his line of work?

M: He's working at the **Garan** factory here in town now. I guess it's a hat factory or something like that.

P: Sarah Jane, what's the date of your marriage?

M: September 13, 1969.

P: And how did it happen then that you left Ardmore and came back here to Mississippi?

M: Well, when we were in Ardmore, I wanted to buy a car to come to Mississippi to visit his parents. And as we were buying the car, we had to get insurance on the car which meant that we had to be married to get the insurance. And I thought we'd come here and get his mother and get married in Ardmore as my grandmother had planned, 'cause she wanted me to get married in the Baptist

church. So, we came to get his mother and when we came down his mother said, "Why can't y'all get married at the Catholic church? Because it's nearer and we don't have to go way back down." So, we stayed here and got married in the church.

[Break in recording]

P: Your husband's family is Catholic?

M: Yes, they are.

P: And so, you got married here?

M: Yes. In his church because the priest had insisted he does. So, we went back anyway and spoke to my grandmother and my father and it was okay, so we got married over here.

P: That's one of the things that I'm curious about, Sarah Jane, is the prevalence of Catholicism among the Choctaws here in Mississippi. I notice there is a church as you come into the Pearl River community. Have you any idea what percentage of the Indians belong to the Catholic religion?

M: No, I have no idea, but there's more Catholics than there are Baptists. A lot more.

P: Oh, it is, it is the predominant religion here?

M: Yes, they started out as Catholics. It was the priests who started out as their community, so they eventually became Catholics. They were raised as Catholics.

P: Sarah Jane, is that only true of the Pearl River community or is it true of all of the Choctaw communities?

M: I think it started out at Tucker, and there's a Catholic church there, that's where the headquarters, or whatever you call it, the priests live there, and the convent is over there. All the Tucker people are Catholics. And I guess most of the people that came to Pearl River are somewhere from Tucker or another community that's Catholic. So, most are Catholics. You won't find very many Baptists.

P: Are there any Indian priests or nuns?

M: No, there aren't.

P: What is the order of the nuns? Do you know?

M: Order?

P: Yes. What do they belong to? Is it a teaching order?

M: They're just out there at Tucker. They got out and help the Indian people have catechism and all that in the community.

P: I see. Now you live in Tucker?

M: Yes.

P: That's where your home is?

M: Yes.

P: Do you have children?

M: I have two.

P: What give me the names and ages.

M: The oldest is Adrian Lenore and she'll be three in March. And the youngest is Jolena Cheryl and she'll be a year the fifteenth of this month.

P: Cheryl?

M: Yes.

P: Jolena?

M: Cheryl.

P: Cheryl.

M: Uh-huh.

P: So, you have two daughters?

M: Yes, uh-huh.

P: I got the impression from what you were saying earlier, Sarah Jane, that you aren't happy with Mississippi as compared with Oklahoma.

M: In family life I am happy here, but according, you know, being socially and everything like that, I'm not really that happy here.

P: Are you aware of discrimination because you are an Indian?

M: Uh—

P: In Philadelphia, in other places?

M: Yes, I have that feeling so I have so much resentment against these people for that reason.

P: Where do you do your shopping?

M: I do it in Meridian sometimes or in Philadelphia. But I ignore the White people that stare. I just automatically say something nasty to someone, not that nasty, but you know. You know they seem to tail you all the time when your store, they say, "May I help you? May I help you?" but when you do need help, they stand around somewhere else thinking you're going to steal something or suspect. So, I just always say, "no, no." We usually just walk off when they do that.

P: Sarah Jane, tell me about your husband. You say he's working at this garment factory in Philadelphia?

M: Yeah.

P: Does he belong to a labor union?

M: Uh, I'm not sure.

P: What kind of work does he do?

M: He presses the pants' legs.

P: Did he have any difficulty as a result of being an Indian? Was he aware of any discrimination?

M: I don't think so, 'cause he has never—Any way he could, he avoided socializing with White people. And any time he's going to play basketball or any kind of sports, he does it all with Indians. So, he's never gone into town and had any kind of difficulty with any one of them.

P: Is this attitude of the Choctaws, which I've sensed among others here, is this directed toward Philadelphia or is it directed towards all White people?

M: Well, a lot of people, I think, it's to any White people. But I guess since they've lived here all their lives, they think all White peoples are like that. Because when my brother-in-law came to Oklahoma for his first time he left Mississippi, we went to a restaurant he had no idea he was going to be accepted or anything and was scared. We told him it was just like another town where you can go anywhere, but I'd forgotten that here you kinda have to be afraid of White people. So, I think you can see the difference there. In the years that you have lived here you still have this sense—I know you have this sense of not being accepted—but are

there specific incidents that you have run into not being served in a restaurant or not being able to do certain things which you could in Oklahoma or elsewhere because you were an Indian?

M: No, I haven't, because I'm aware of these things. We visited Mississippi several times before I made my home here. And we were aware of these things because we once came to Philadelphia during the Choctaw Fair when I was about twelve years old. And when we entered this cafe they said, "You have to eat in the back part. You can't enter through the front door." So, we just left that place and ever since then, I never did bother to go into any cafeterias in Philadelphia.

P: I want to get back to your growing up years and find out if in Ardmore, in your family, was there much discussion about Choctaw history, the Choctaw past?

M: No, I don't think so. We never did sit around, talk about something like that. If they talked about, family discussion it was always tales of long ago—which I don't believe—and all those sorts. But it was never history, I don't think.

P: Are these myths and legends? Were they passed down from one generation to another?

M: Yes, I think so.

P: Are these things that you can remember your grandmother telling you?

M: Uh, my great-aunt. She was my grandmother's sister. She was about ten years older than my grandmother.

P: These were stories she told to the children?

M: Yes.

P: What were they? Scare stories?

M: I think that's what they were meant to be. Because they used to come to Mississippi all the time and they'd say tell us something about Mississippi, but it'd be something scary like there were more goblins over here than there in Ardmore, or there were more witches and Choctaws up here than there were back there. Such things like that.

P: This was a scary place then according to the way she described it.

M: Yes. Uh-huh.

P: If you're not good, you'll go to Mississippi!

M: But we always came anyway every year. [Laughter]

P: Can you remember a particular story that's sort of stuck with you over the years? One of the scare stories you heard as a little child?

M: I think one of the scariest stories I heard from them was that I guess, I don't think you've ever heard of prophets they have among the Tribes? Well, they're supposed to be able to sense you, and they can tell what you're thinking, and they can put a hex on you any time they got ready to. And that's the only thing they used to scare us with was over here. I think that's what frightened me most. And I have a big mouth; I'm always blabbing off about anything. And recently, just last trip, my grandmother told me I better shut up because I was here in Mississippi and somebody's going to put a hex on me. That's what I've always been scared of. I still am.

P: And you remember that as a little girl?

M: Yes.

P: Your aunt and grandmother talking about the prophets?

M: Yes, I think they only used to tell us all those things so we could go to sleep 'cause it was usually late. They could just lay and talk. And my grandmother's niece was there, too, but she was old; she was old. And they were all in the bedroom talking about these things. And we used to fall asleep scared 'cause they'd lay there talking about things like that.

P: Were prophets always bad people?

M: I think so.

P: No good prophets at all for telling good things about a person. [Laughter] But they were, did each individual have his own personal prophet? Like a personal spirit?

M: I don't think so. It was just certain people that was like that. I don't know for sure if they knew they were like that or anything. It might have been just they heard it from someone up here. 'Cause they used to say, "Don't talk about that man 'cause he's got red eyes, or he wears red scarf." They used to tell us that all the time.

P: Sarah Jane, how did it happen your grandmother lived with you?

M: Well, my mother died when I was two years old. And whenever my mother died, my father just sort of drifted away because he had lost his wife. And he just told my great-aunt to go ahead and take care of us kids, my brothers and sister. And he said, "Go ahead and take care of 'em, and provide 'em with what they need and I'll go ahead and release them to you." Like he was going to give us away to her, but he said he was gonna go ahead and come back and see us and all that. Whenever my great-aunt inherited some land and when her husband had died—

she had a guardian, because she owned the land she had some oil wells on it— when that guardian told my great-aunt that she had to give us away or something, she decided to keep two and us three to my grandmother. So, we were all, we separated. My sister and brother lived with my grandmother and my other two sisters lived with my great-aunt. And we, we weren't even half a mile apart. There was two houses on one land.

P: What about your father? Did he reappear on the scene?

M: Yes, he always did. He came home.

P: Oh, he was there. So, you had a father figure there.

M: Yes, yes, he lived with us. At my grandmother's house.

P: So, you were raised by your grandmother?

M: Yes.

P: Is there any special attitude among the Choctaws toward older people? Are they regarded as something very special?

M: In my family she was. She was, she was the string of the family, really. She was the one that held all of us together 'cause she was religious. And just a year ago she died in a car accident and that was a big loss.

P: What about in the ordinary Choctaw family? Do older people have a special role to play?

M: In where, here?

P: Here. For instance, in a household where you'd have three generations, grandparents, parents, and children. Who really is responsible for the household?

M: I think the grandparents. Although I haven't seen any young people here that respects their grandparents as I used to, that I think they were supposed to be treated.

P: In the Choctaw family here in Mississippi, what role does the woman play?

M: Here in Mississippi?

P: Yes, in your own household now. What role do you play in the household?

M: Blabber mouth! [Laughter] Well—

P: I mean you're the wife and you're the mother but are you responsible. Is it the mother who is responsible for making the decisions or is it a family where decision-making is shared by husband and wife?

M: Well, in my family, the husband and wife both makes the decision together.

P: In the Seminole families, it's the woman who really makes the decisions. It's a matriarchal society there. But here it's a patriarchal society, isn't it? The father is still pretty much the decision-maker in the traditional family?

M: I think so. Whatever the husband says, the woman has to follow.

P: And the woman goes to live with the husband's family, rather than vice versa?

M: As I seen it here, I seen it the other way around.

P: But that's the exception, isn't it, rather than the husband goes to live with the wife's family?

M: I really didn't notice the difference.

P: Does the wife's brothers—that is the uncles—do they have any say-so over the discipline of the children?

M: I don't think so, unh-uh.

P: That would, that's the way it would work in a matriarchal society. And in some Southeastern Indian groups that's the way it does work. Now you're saying that perhaps the attitude that your family had to your grandmother was a special kind of a thing.

M: Yes.

P: That grandparents really are not the decision-makers in the family if they are not contributing to the family's income. They're there by sufferance, is that right?

M: In my family in Oklahoma—

P: No, I mean here.

M: Oh, here.

P: The ordinary family here in, in Mississippi—Choctaw family.

M: Yes, I think that's so.

P: Are there any institutions to take care of the elderly here?

M: There is—what do you call that—that center up here is for the old people. Anyway, it's, it's like a—

P: Old age home?

M: Yes, it's one of those, uh-huh.

P: Do they live there?

M: Yes, they have ten patients there. But I think it's for people that doesn't have anyone that can take care of them and all that.

P: If there are children or grandchildren, they are supposed to take care of elderly people who have no income?

M: Yes, but most elderly people has income of some sort.

P: From where?

M: From the welfare or from—

P: Social Security?

M: Uh-huh.

P: But it's mainly, what you're saying is that it's largely a family responsibility as far as the Indian community is concerned?

M: If they can take care of them. But there are many that takes care of their grandparents like that. They're usually neglected if they're older people.

P: What about the children, homeless children, orphaned children? Is there any Indian community responsibility for them?

M: Well, the Social Services up in town places them in foster homes. And the foster parents takes care of them and I guess they receive a check during the month.

P: But this is, this is the government that's doing it. I'm wondering if there is any Indian community responsibility.

M: I don't think so.

P: So, there's no Indian community responsibility to the elderly, and no Indian community responsibility to homeless or orphaned children. How about the indigent? How about the people who are unemployed?

M: They—

P: A mother, for instance, the father's died, who, who helps her other than what the federal and state government does?

M: I don't know. I believe that's the only one that helps them.

P: You have no institutions then in any of the Indian communities here that have this kind of a responsibility?

M: I don't think so. Not that I'm aware of.

P: What about the church? The Catholic church or the Baptist church do anything like that that you're aware of?

M: I don't think so. But if you are unemployed, the priest would help you in different ways to help you try to get a job.

P: But there is no structure, no formal structure where a person would go to the tribal council? What happens if a person has a problem, a marital problem, or a legal problem? Are there agencies here on the reservation to take care of that?

M: I think there's a Legal Aid and some kind of counselors.

P: There is a marriage counseling service for Indian couples?

M: It's mental and health, alcohol counseling but they said they'd counsel marriages too.

P: But it is on the reservation, and it is available for Indian people?

M: Yes, it is.

P: Do you know who funds this?

M: I'm not sure.

P: Whether this is federally funded or Indians?

M: Yes.

P: I'm trying to establish the responsibility that the Indian community has to the Indians, is really what I'm trying to get onto the tape.

M: I don't think there are anything like that. They're all federal-funded, I think.

P: Uh-huh. Do you think this is part of the Indian tradition to neglect the homeless, the unwanted, the have-nots, in the Indian community?

M: I've seen it that way. I mean if you were to see a homeless child you'd sympathize with the child and take him in or something, but here, "Too bad the mother didn't want him," seems to say.

P: There's no you do not sense a community responsibility, then, either in a formal and institutionalized way or an informal way?

M: Uh-huh.

P: Do your children go to nursery school?

M: No, they don't.

P: They're too young now?

M: Yes, my oldest will probably go to Head Start next year, but I doubt if she will, 'cause there are so many programs they have that even though I've worked for the Tribe I seem to resent some of the programs they have. I've worked with Head Start before, I hadn't seen no progress or anything, and I feel that I can teach my child just as much as if she did go into that school.

P: Tell me about your work. Your own personal work with the Tribe.

M: It's a parent-trainer. What we do is go into—

P: Parent-trainer?

M: Yes.

P: T-R-A-I-N-E-R?

M: Yes. We go into the homes of children from 0-3, I think, kids that doesn't go to Head Start. And we supposed to train the parents to work with the children in

toys. Any kind of toys you take to the children they automatically play with. But if you play with the children, they can learn these things as they play with the toys.

P: What do you mean by learning these things?

M: You can learn anything from a toy: colors, counting, or what it does. This is what we do to train a parent and as she, as the child is playing with that, when we make home visits, the mother works with the during the time we're there.

P: Who supplies the toys?

M: The Family Education. It's funded.

P: Is this a federally funded program?

M: It is, uh-huh.

P: So, did you need any special training for this?

M: Yes, we had to have two weeks workshop, and off and on we're going to have workshops in order to train us to what kind of toys to provide with these children, and what kind of teaching, learning techniques it brings and all these things.

P: You work just with the mother in the home?

M: Yes, or the caretaker, the person who watches the child during the day when the mother is working.

P: If the mother is working.

M: Yes.

P: You go in then and you try, you work with the mother, and you attempt to turn over to her the responsibility of interacting and educating her child through the use of these toys which you supply?

M: Yes.

P: How many households do you have under your supervision?

M: Oh, about eleven, I think it is.

P: Do you visit them weekly?

M: Yes, once a week is the home visits we make.

P: Is this a part-time job for you?

M: No, this is a forty-hour week.

P: So how long do you spend in an average home?

M: About an hour. Sometimes more, whenever, 'cause these childs usually don't come up and play it just like that. They're gonna be shy and all different kind of children.

P: Do you find this a successful program? Is it working?

M: I haven't seen a success yet. We've only started working about four months now. But maybe we'll see something later.

P: Is it supposed to equip the child to do what?

M: To be able to know these things whenever they go to Head Start. Like they can be able to recognize colors or be able to develop language or motor skill.

P: Sarah Jane, tell me about the Head Start program for Indian children.

M: This—

P: It starts with the three—

M: Yes, three years old.

P: And goes to five?

M: Three to four, I think. Five goes to kindergarten. They're set up in each community for the families that's on poverty line. And if you're not on there, you're gonna to have to pay a fee.

P: What is the poverty for the family? Three thousand?

M: Four, I think. Forty-one hundred or something like that. And if you're beyond that, you're going to have to pay from fifteen dollars up to three hundred dollars a month.

P: So, there are many children in the Head Start program who come from more affluent families?

M: Yes, uh-huh. What they're trying to do is get them ready to go to kindergarten. Be earning these things of that nature.

P: Are these Indian teachers in the Head Start?

M: Yes, it is. That's why I don't want to send my child.

P: Why?

M: Because I think if it was a White person, she'd be speaking English to that child, and she can learn English, even if she didn't understand it when she first entered, she could learn while she was going. But then with an Indian teacher she always talks Choctaw. While I was working with them, she did. And I didn't see no kind of improvement in language, 'cause that's the worst thing an Indian child has here whenever they start school.

P: Is the language skill?

M: Yes, it's that when they can't seem to—

P: Are your children bilingual?

M: One of them. Just one talks, so she talks Choctaw all the time. We talked English to her. She understands it, but she doesn't talk back in English yet. 'Cause she lives with, more with my in-laws and everybody in that family talks Choctaw.

P: Are you planning on trying to discourage her knowledge of Choctaw?

M: No, I'm not. It's just that I want her to talk both languages and be able to understand them both.

P: And to develop writing skills in both?

M: Yes.

P: You can write Choctaw, can't you?

M: Only when I have to.

P: No, I mean it's a writable language.

M: Yes, it is.

P: Not necessarily you. You do have an alphabet and it can be written.

M: It's just like alphabet that y'all have—ABCs, but they're written in Choctaw language. They also have a bible in Choctaw language.

P: Now I want to get back to your work. You're paid by this by the federal government, aren't you?

M: Yes.

P: Does this operate under Civil Service?

M: I don't think so.

P: How did you get the job?

M: Well, they had an opening during the summer, and I just applied. I mean, they just brought out some papers, the have an outreach worker, or some people in

the Tribe brings out papers to these people in the homes and I wasn't working in the summer. So, this lady brought these papers and said, "If you're interested in working with Family Education, just fill out the questions," and there were only questions. And I filled I it out and gave it to her, and a month later they told me to come for a workshop.

P: You have to drive, of course, going from house to house, don't you?

M: Yes.

P: Do they compensate you for your automobile expenses?

M: Ten cents a mile, which isn't much right now.

P: No, unh-uh. Uh, I wanted to ask you, Sarah, do you consider yourself to be a Women's Libber?

M: No, I don't think so.

P: Why not?

M: I like to be pampered once in a while! [Laughter]

P: Do you philosophically support what they're saying and what they're doing?

M: No. I just don't think about it, really.

P: How political are you?

M: Not that much. I really don't care what's happening. I mean I'm just—It seems that I'm just—I don't know. Just hanging in the air.

P: Is this, has this always been true, this kind of sense of political apathy on your part?

M: Yes.

P: Are you registered to vote?

M: Yes.

P: Did you vote in [19]72?

M: No, I just registered this year. Last part of last year that I registered. And I only voted for the wet and dry thing they have here. That's the only thing I voted for.

P: Do you—of course, your children are so young—I was going to ask you whether you felt you had any special problem with what's going on in Washington and what's going on in the world in trying to teach your children the difference between good and evil. Do you feel that the political situation has in any way harmed your own home life?

M: I don't think so.

P: Is your husband very politically motivated?

M: No, he isn't.

P: So, he is not a voter or is overly conscious about what's happening?

M: No, he isn't.

P: Let me ask you about the community as a whole. Are they sensitive to the political struggle?

M: I don't think so. They just, you know, when those propagandists they hear on TV, they're gonna go around and say it, but they're not gonna do nothing, that's just it, they don't seem to care.

P: Do many people here vote?

M: I don't think so. 'Cause there was a lot of 'em that didn't vote. We registered a lot of 'em last year. I don't think they even bothered to vote.

P: When you say, "we registered a lot", who's the "we?"

M: Well, it worked for ABE last year.

P: What's that?

M: Adult Basic Education. And we had a day class on the day they were going to be registered. So, we had at least fifty students, adult students, and we took them up to the courthouse and helped them fill out the forms and those things that you register. 'Cause most of them can't read and don't know what "yes" or "no" means, so we helped them register.

P: I want to get back, leave politics for just a minute, I want to explore the educational situation here a little bit more with you, Sarah Jane. You were talking about you're not going to let your children go into the Head Start program, that you feel you can do as well. Are you satisfied as a mother living here with the schools?

M: No, I'm not.

P: What do you feel, on the basis of your knowledge, is wrong, let's say this institution, which looks like it has a lovely building.

M: I think the, what's wrong is the teachers are White people of course, and they have no interest in the Choctaws. Maybe a few will, but not all of them, and they teach them, "if you don't learn, that's your own problem," they seem to say. And they just let them roam around. Give 'em an "A" even if they were absent half the time. And then they don't have any kind of competition here it seems that.

P: You don't feel that they're demanding enough from these kids?

M: I don't think so. I know the individual should want to learn and should do all this, but they're not given that much to learn and to know. I have several brothers-in-

laws and sister-in-laws here in school and I've never heard not one of them speak English yet. They talk Choctaw all the time. And any kind of subject they're doing, they feel it's difficult because it's really not that hard if they can study and have a teacher pressure them to do it. But they say, "ah, I'm gonna get an A anyway," so they'll stick their book up on the shelf and bring their books back next day.

P: What facilities are there here on the reservation other than the school for education? Is there a library?

M: Not out of the school. That's the only library we have here.

P: Well, can you come in as a resident of this community and take books out?

M: They're strict though. I don't think so, unh-uh. 'Cause I was working with the BIA whenever we checked out books over there, but they were so strict. I don't think that just anyone could come in and check out a book.

P: Well, where do you get your reading material?

M: I really don't read that much unless I have to. But whenever I have to, I go to the Neshoba County library in town.

P: And you can go in there? There's no problem about that?

M: There might be a problem, but then I ignored all that, I just told them I want a book out and they ask a bunch of questions, like you were going to steal a book, but you get a card—

P: Is there a little theater group or choral groups or anything like that on the reservation?

M: Not on the reservation, no.

P: There's a great deal of interest in sports, isn't there?

M: There is. That's about all there is around here.

P: The men enjoy this? Or is it both men and women?

M: Men and women both because that's about the only thing they can do around here. So, they enjoy it so much that they all the time.

P: Is it—everybody's a participant?

M: Yes, depends on if they want to or not.

P: You said your husband plays basketball.

M: Yes. He plays every Sunday afternoon and every chance he gets.

P: What about you?

M: No, unh-uh.

P: You're a spectator sports fan?

M: No, not really.

P: What are the most popular sports?

M: Here? Just basketball and football, I suppose.

P: I haven't seen a tennis court here on the reservation.

M: We don't have one.

P: Would people play if there was one?

M: I don't think they'd know how to play it or anything.

P: Tennis has become such a big sport in the United States. Are there any of the men who play golf?

M: No, unh-uh, haven't seen one.

P: I noticed the new swimming pool built.

M: Yes, they just had that built. Just—not too long ago.

P: I didn't see it in March when I was here, but it is now. Has that been used a good deal?

M: I don't know. I haven't been here that many times.

P: What do you have in Tucker?

M: Nothing.

P: How large a community is Tucker?

M: I don't think it's over 160 people.

P: Where is it in proximity to this place?

M: It's about fifteen miles from here. It's about nine miles south of Philadelphia.

P: Does your husband's family live up Pearl River?

M: No, they live in Tucker.

P: So, your family then, the people you're related to, are all in Tucker?

M: Yes.

P: You don't have to get over to this community too often, do you?

M: No.

P: Is there much visiting back and forth between communities?

M: I think that there are in some of the families that had—maybe they once lived in other community and had to move to Pearl River because of their workplace or something like that. But there's not too many people in Tucker that comes to Pearl River to visit.

P: Sarah, how social are Indian families? Do you visit back and forth? Do you entertain?

M: There's nothing—no. All they do is just stay home. I don't think anyone entertains anybody, unless it's gonna be a birthday celebration or something like that. They invite immediate family and have a supper or something like that.

P: But there's no tradition of giving parties back and forth, cocktail parties or—

M: No, there isn't. I don't think—

P: Having people in to eat or for drinks or anything like that?

M: If it's they can always visit someone and have supper with them, that's something they do every day so—

P: But that's not a special kind of thing?

M: No, it isn't.

P: You're getting ready for Christmas now. Is that a particularly special holiday for you?

M: To me, it is. But it's so different from my home in Ardmore than it is here, that I'm beginning to feel like Christmas isn't here at all.

P: Why is it so different?

M: Because I was raised knowing Christmas as the birth of Jesus and having all these Christmas plays that they put on in church, giving presents and shopping even in October. But here, Christmas is here and that's it. I haven't seen anyone exchange gifts. We've been to something that they call "Christmas Tree", I guess it's a party for something but the way they celebrate is some people comes up wearing Santa Claus, being a Santa Claus and he'll have three helpers they call 'em. But they wear Halloween masks! That's what's so odd about it. And they just clown around, making jokes, telling funny stories. And that's not Christmas to me.

P: You had a Santa Claus in Ardmore?

M: Yes, but not helpers with masks, and that's what's so different. And here they don't give presents, like we exchange gifts down there. Here, they just give one apple and that's it.

P: Well, do you exchange gifts in your own home?

M: Yes, uh-huh. I have a sister here in, too, that so, we usually exchange gifts and—

P: How about generally in the community? Do people exchange gifts here?

M: I don't think so.

P: Do you buy your in-laws presents and do they buy you presents?

M: I buy my in-laws presents, but none of them has bought me one for Christmas, So I don't think they do.

P: Is this part of the tradition here?

M: I don't think so, 'cause I haven't seen anyone do that.

P: Do you think that's because of an economic factor or is it just not part of the historical development?

M: It's just not part of it, I guess. They seem to think it was something because I gave them presents the first year I was here in [19]69, but I went to Ardmore for Christmas that year. When I came back there were three presents for us. And they bought it for us 'cause we bought them something. But they probably wouldn't have bought us anything if we didn't buy them anything either, though.

P: What about the Christmas tree? Is that part of the home decoration here?

M: Not for too many people. My in-laws never did put up a tree, 'til I did.

[Break in recording]

P: I want to ask you about Christmas as it's celebrated traditional and at the present here on this reservation. Now you're saying that gift exchanges is not part of the tradition.

M: I don't think so.

P: And you're also saying now that the Christmas tree is not a major part of the celebration here.

M: No. But what they do is they take a—what do you call it? Cedar tree?

P: Uh-huh.

M: And they bring it into the yard and stick it in the ground and they, somewhere from 25th, I guess, somewhere from 25th to New Years, just anybody in that community can have, they call it a Christmas Tree, I guess it's a party. But they sell fruits, they sell nuts and all that, and whoever comes buys those things and gives it as a gift to people who participate in that party.

P: All right, I want to get that because that's interesting, you know, and I have not heard that before, Sarah, so I want to get it down on the tape. Now the family puts a cut tree—

M: Uh-huh.

P: A cedar tree of any size—

M: Yes.

P: In the front yard, they just put it into the ground.

M: Yes.

P: Is the tree then decorated?

M: Sometimes they only have lights, but then some just puts icicles on theirs.

P: Uh-huh. Now this is put up on Christmas Eve?

M: Yes, they start on Christmas Eve.

P: And it's not done before Christmas Eve?

M: Unh-uh.

P: The decoration continues from that point until New Years?

M: Mmhm. Just any house, any family can have one. They can have one from every night 'til that New Year's Eve.

P: Now, I don't understand about the party business that's there. Explain that a little bit more in detail for the tape.

M: What I mean about that party is that, like I said, a Santa Claus and three helpers. What's so funny is that they start somewhere around eight o'clock, and they say, "Here they come." And you hear firecrackers, and you can see a lot of fireworks up in the sky.

P: This is Christmas Eve?

M: Any time from Christmas Eve to New Years.

P: I see. So, you may have this every night?

M: Yes. It depends on if the family has it or not.

P: Well, who is dressed up as Santa Claus and his helpers?

M: Well, the people who's gonna have that party.

P: I see.

M: Picks those people.

P: I see.

M: So, four people is gonna be ready to perform or act or something. So, they come and the people are supposed to think of them as coming from North Pole or something like that. And they walk—what they first do is drive them off somewhere and let 'em off around quarter mile, and they're gonna walk back to the house. While they're walkin' back, they pop firecrackers and all that stuff. When they finally come to the house, they start telling their story about what happened when they were on their way to the house, and they just make up jokes like that. And people just has fun laughing.

P: And the neighbors then gather around and watch these antics?

M: Yes.

P: Now tell me what is on the tree other than the possible lights and icicles?

M: Nothing.

P: Well, you were saying about nuts and that kind of thing. Now where are they? What part do they play? Nuts and candy.

M: Okay. Whoever gives the party buys those things and in turn sell it to someone who wants to buy it and wrap it around newspaper and give it to whoever they want to give it to that's at that party.

P: Uh-huh. Well, what do they do with the money that they realize from the sale?

M: They keep it. That's for their self, I guess.

P: I see. So, they have bought food supplies which are then sold to the people who have gathered and the people who buy it then, in turn, either eat it or give it to anybody they want?

M: Yes. It's like you were giving them a present, but there they give 'em an apple or an orange. When we first came down around [19]65, my brother-in-law said there was going to be a Christmas tree at Tucker. So, my grandmother, my aunt, and all my cousins, a lot of us came down went to the—we didn't know what to expect. So, when this came up, they called our names, everybody got our names. So, we wrote all of our names on pieces of paper, and we thought, we're going to get presents and it turns out we got one orange. And that was a disappointment, 'cause we thought we was going to get a present.

P: I have never heard of this kind of custom anywhere else, have you, Sarah?

M: No, I haven't 'til I came down here.

P: Well, is this true of all of the communities, all of the Choctaw communities?

M: I think so! They do it at Tucker every year.

P: Do they do it here at Pearl River?

M: I don't know. We don't go to different communities. I don't think different people that comes from different communities goes to other communities.

P: Well, but had you heard about it being done here?

M: I don't think so, 'cause they don't have—the houses are too close together, 'cause whenever they give I it, it's usually—

P: Do you know if there's any religious significance to this?

M: I don't know. I don't think so. I could ask my brother-in-law why do they have Christmas, and he would know.

P: Well, it's kind of interesting, you see because that's a different kind of a tradition than we've heard about. What about the use of Christmas stockings? Do the children hang up stockings?

M: Unh-uh. Only stockings they see is whenever you have candy and buy 'em in a bag from a store.

P: Well, where do you—where does Santa Claus leave presents in your house?

M: They don't get any presents.

P: Your children do.

M: Oh, my children does. We just put 'em under the tree and she doesn't know anything about Santa Claus.

P: Oh, you, that is not a tradition here? Santa Claus? You haven't told your children about Santa Claus?

M: I guess it depends on individual families whether they do or not. But my little girl doesn't, hasn't seen a Santa Claus. She was born here, and she's been living here all this time. I don't think she's seen a Santa Claus other than sitting in a window somewhere. So, she has never even spoke about Santa Claus.

P: And the hanging of the stockings then is not a part of a Christmas celebration here among the Choctaws?

M: No, unh-uh.

P: Do they have any special foods at Christmastime?

M: Turkey. Of course, I don't think they'd buy it if they were going to. 'Cause I think if they're Catholic and attend the church the priest or sisters will give them a turkey for Christmas.

P: Sarah, what about Thanksgiving? Has there any significance, Choctaw significance to that?

M: Unh-uh.

P: Do you have Thanksgiving dinner?

M: We did among our family, but I don't think they would have done it if I didn't, because no one celebrates any Thanksgiving dinner in our community. Except me and my sister decided to cook up something and we got together and ate at my mother-in-law's.

P: Are there any special holidays during the year? We've gone through Thanksgiving and Christmas. Are there any special holidays which the Choctaws do celebrate as some big event in the year?

M: Unh-uh. I haven't seen the Choctaws go crazy over anything like that.

P: Easter?

M: No. Even then they weren't. They didn't hunt eggs until I came down here and we started hunting eggs in our family. So, I don't know. I haven't heard anyone having anything—

P: How about Halloween? Do the children dress up for Halloween?

M: I didn't see any.

P: So, trick-or-treating is not a childhood kind of activity?

M: I don't think so. I guess the main reason is because they didn't have that much transportation, so they didn't do all this long ago or several years back to be accustomed to it now.

P: Well, tell me, what kind of tradition can you pass on here from one generation to the other? You, as a mother, passing on things to your children, which are Indian.

M: That's what I'm always saying, let's take 'em back to Ardmore. [Laughter] I don't know. There's nothing they do except everyday living, go to church on Sunday.

P: Do you talk to them about Choctaw history?

M: No, we don't.

P: Do the Choctaws have any special heroes? Indian heroes?

M: I haven't heard.

P: The Seminoles, you see, look up to the figure of Osceola. I was wondering if there was a somebody that you, the Choctaws, felt was very important to them—an Indian figure.

M: This may be a surprise, but I've found among these Choctaws here, they don't put one up like that. They're always knocking the other one down. They don't look up to anybody. They don't want any Choctaw better than they are. That's a thing I've noticed back here.

P: It is a levelling process, then?

M: Yes.

P: Everybody is supposed to be on the same level with nobody having more or doing more.

M: And so whenever one has a little bit more all the gossip goes to that person so. What they're doing is competing among each other and just breaking each other down, so I don't think—

P: There are, obviously families are improving themselves. There are many Indians who are making good livings now.

M: Yes.

P: And who are living in more comfortable, better-equipped homes. Is there much jealousy among the have-nots, about the people who have a television and have an automobile and whatever else it is?

M: I think so. I think it's really out of jealousy that they make up stories about another family that has this and that and all those sorts.

P: By stories what do you mean?

M: They could say, "What makes them think they're any better than we are?" You'd be surprised what stories you can hear out of these Choctaws here. That really get me, 'cause there in Ardmore, you don't live that close to another Choctaw to be talking about them. But here, they're so close together, they're always saying something about the other person here and there.

P: Sarah, as a person how religious are you?

M: Well, I guess I live by what I was taught.

P: You have your own personal standard of ethics—what's good and what's bad?

M: Yes. And there's a lot of things I think that's bad that people here doesn't think of it as bad at all.

P: Uh-huh. Are you a regular churchgoer?

M: Not here. I haven't gone to church ever since I been here. Because for one reason when I first went to a church when I came down here in [19]68, they all stared at me like, "who's that odd thing over there?" And no one said a word.

What I expected was everyone to welcome me, and they didn't. And ever since that I never did go back to that church and there's not that many Baptist church in Tucker, there's only one.

M: So, I never did go back and sometimes I go to church with my husband.

P: That's the Catholic church?

M: Uh-huh, 'cause both of our daughters are Catholic.

P: Do you feel you're missing anything in yourself as a result of this break with religion?

M: I think so. No, not really, but here, it's just going to church and that's it. But when I was over there, we had all-night singings, have you heard of those singings?

P: Unh-uh.

M: But they have singings, they start somewhere from eight o'clock and six o'clock in the morning. Different quartets, sings and all those sort. And they had it all over anywhere. So, we went all the to Tahlequah, just anywhere in Oklahoma. They had singing every Saturday night and we'd go. That was our treat, you know.

P: That was like a social activity?

M: Yes, uh-huh, where you meet different people, different Tribes, each find a lot of friends there. But here they don't have things like that. And there's no place to go. Even Baptist church here they just go to their church. And they think one Baptist church is better than the other church. So, I just never did bother with anything like that.

P: There's no community spirit then, in Tucker?

M: I don't think so.

P: Do you have your own local government there?

M: Unh-uh.

P: There's no mayor or commission or anything like that?

M: No, they just have a tribal council.

P: Representatives?

M: From the community.

P: You have two representatives?

M: Yes.

P: Have any members of your husband's family served on the council?

M: I don't think so. His stepfather might've served once, a long time ago, but I don't know.

P: So, it's not a politically involved family, then?

M: No, it's not.

P: What do your in-laws do? To make a living?

M: Well, his stepfather's disabled, and his mother is just a babysitter for us.

P: So, if you had your choosing, you'd go back to Ardmore, wouldn't you, Sarah?

M: I would. But then, my grandmother's passed away. Like I said, she was the string holder. Like, she's gone, my relatives, immediate relatives that we were so close are scattered out now. So, if I were to go back there, I'd probably just go for a visit. But still, I would be satisfied.

P: Sarah, if you had your own life to live over again, and could choose it, would you choose to live as an Indian?

M: I think so.

P: You're not bitter or disappointed with things?

M: No.

P: As you look toward the future for your own children, how do you see it?

M: Well, as I see it, it's nothing if they stay here in Mississippi. But if I, I don't know if I will or what, but I want to take them back to Ardmore where they can start school there. 'Cause there, it's gonna be a social life with everybody there. Because in here, even Choctaws don't like kids like that in school. And every if you bring this up in school, my child done this to that child, well, the mothers are going to take up for their child. I've seen so many of that in White public schools. I didn't see any of that when I was going to school.

P: Sarah, tell me what you think about this program that we were talking about today the Oral History program. What do you see its value?

M: Well, its value will come out of it if the Tribe or the tribal council decide to publish something where it can be put, where someone can make use of it.

P: Do you feel that the people in Tucker will cooperate with you on this interview?

M: I don't know. Some people I've heard says, "There's no good to do it now. All the old ones are dead." That's what I've heard from the people there.

P: Are all the old ones dead?

M: There's only two Elders in that community. And then, I don't think they can remember back too far.

P: But there are things that today's people can tell you.

M: Uh-huh.

P: I wanted to ask about other problems in the community, Sarah. Is there much alcoholism?

M: In other communities, yes. But in Tucker, there's not too many. They drink, but they're not alcoholics.

P: Why is this a prevalence of alcohol?

M: I think one reason because these Choctaws think they've got courage. "I can do this." And it's dry in this county. So, they're gonna say, "I can get by with it." And they're going to go out to the county line and buy it and bring it back and get drunk on it. Thinking they're—

P: So, it's just a matter of trying to show off what they can do?

M: I think that's what it is. I think if it was wet, they would probably drink it socially, and you know, not drink so much. But since it's dry when they go down there, they get enough they can get drunk, then they end up somewhere.

P: What about the drug culture? Is there a prevalence of that?

M: I don't know about that drugs. But then, I haven't heard any Choctaws in these communities taking drugs or anything.

P: You've not had any problems with the teenagers?

M: I don't think so. Even the teenagers drink, so I don't think they bother with drugs. They probably couldn't afford it anyway.

P: What about the moral standards of the young people, the teenagers here? Are you finding very much of that like you are with the non-Indian communities? Girls getting pregnant, couples living together?

- M: You see a lot of that here. It's just a common thing over here. Like I was telling my husband, my grandmother would think that was awfully bad if it was over there. Here, it's just a common thing.
- P: It's not condemned by the community?
- M: It is not. It seems it was long ago, but not now.
- P: I mean today. By today's standards.
- M: No.
- P: Girls are not ostracized?
- M: They're too freely. They do what they want to.
- P: Well, what happens, what happens to illegitimate children?
- M: They keep them.
- P: They're not given up for adoption?
- M: If they wanted to, probably would be, but they keep it. And then what I've seen mostly is they keep them, and they treat them so mean later, I mean, just 'cause they were born like that they seem to resent them after they're born.
- P: So, children, then, are handicapped—Illegitimate children are handicapped in this society?
- M: Mmhm.
- P: But do you think there's a double standard? Is society here, the Indian society, more critical of the girls than they are of the boys?
- M: I don't think they're even critical of either one of them. 'Cause they just—I haven't seen any discipline in any of the families. My in-laws don't discipline their kids.

And they're just getting to where they're going to run out later 'cause they're 'round thirteen, fourteen.

P: Are children not well-behaved here?

M: I don't think so. Not the way they should be. I don't know why they act that way, but I guess they want to show off to the other person or what. They just all go crazy, it seems.

P: Why do children do here after they've graduated high school?

M: Some goes to college and come back later and get married or something like that, I've noticed.

P: But many of them stay right here? They don't move around seeking better opportunities, better jobs?

M: I don't think a Mississippi Choctaw can move away from their reservation.

P: Why?

M: They can go off, but they just can't get adjusted to the other kind of life. Like here on the reservation, they're with the Indians all the time. And they're always federally funded in some way to them out. If they don't have a job, they can be able to run to the Social Service or the Tribe and ask for some kind of help on groceries or food or something, clothes of some sort. And if you go out somewhere like that there's not anybody to be there to run to. So, I don't think they can be able to do those things. That's why they come back all the time. That's the way I see it. I don't know if that's so or not. But it seems that way. 'Cause they come back, they know they're going to have a job with the Tribe and

goof off and still get paid for it. But in other places, if it's a company that you go goof off, they're going to fire you. But here at the Tribe they don't.

P: You're kind of pessimistic, I think, about the future of this society here, Sarah. Don't you think that may be part of that's homesickness? [Laughter]

M: Probably, I think so. It might be. [Laughter] I just never see any good over here and I don't hate the people or anything, but it's just that way.

[End of interview]

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