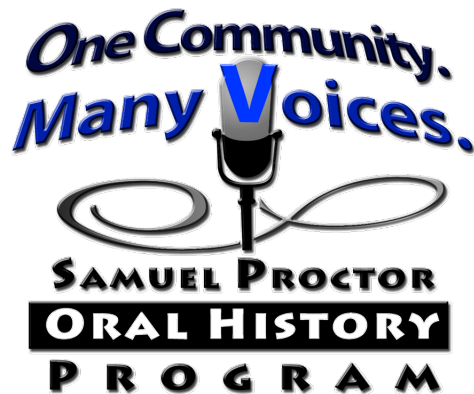


Calvin Isaac

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-025**

Interview by:

**Staff of Nanih Waiya
September 15, 1975**



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MISS CHOC 025 Calvin Isaac
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Abstract: Calvin Isaac, newly elected Chief of the Tribe, speaks about his goals for his term. His primary focus will be on education, followed by improving the employment rate of the Tribe. He discusses his goals to establish a community college on the reservation, speaks about the services provided by the new Choctaw Health Center, and other planned facilities and housing. He discusses the importance of reviving traditional arts and crafts, and discusses the impact of alcoholism in the community. Finally, he discusses public relations with the state of Mississippi.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi; Politics and government; Education]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

MISS CHOC 025

Interviewee: Calvin Isaac

Interviewer: Staff of Nanih Waiya

Date of Interview: September 15, 1975

S: Today's September 15, 1975. Today we're interviewing Calvin Isaac, our new Tribe Chief. Calvin, what was your first reaction to being our new Tribal Chief?

I: Well, my first reaction was one of joy, because this was my first jump into politics, and I really wasn't sure whether I would be elected or not, but I had hope that I would. So, when I finally got the official word that I had been elected Chief, my first reaction was that—it was one of joy. And it was a compliment, I think, to the grassroots people, because they're the ones who elected me.

S: How did you get involved?

I: Well, it's a long story. When I was younger, I wanted to get involved in politics, but at the time I first thought of it, I was a bit young to even run for the council. But I felt then that there would come a time when I would become of age and would be able to place my name as a candidate for one of the positions. As it turned out, I did not run for the council as such, but when the opportunity came for me to run as a candidate for the Tribal Chief, I felt this was the time to do it, and I jumped into it.

S: And now, as being a Tribal Chief, what are some programs for the next four years?

I: Well, as you know, I am an educator by profession, and education is my first field. I'd like to do some things in education that I wasn't able to do in the time that I served as classroom teacher, or Choctaw principal, and so on. I would like to see more and more of our young people going to colleges and vocational training to develop skills that are marketable. I would also like to see a

community college established here on the reservation. I would like to see more and more of our adults go into some form of education, thereby getting skills for use in the various employment areas. So, education is a top priority in my administration. I also look at economic development as another area where we need to go after industries, and I think at this point we have really established some contacts that will in time, I think, bring about industry for our people on the reservation. I would also like to see more and more of our people employed in the local area. Even though we do have some, I think that the employment rate for our people is rather low. I'd like to see more and more of our people get employment in the local industries, not only with the Tribe, but with the other public sectors. So, these are main areas I'm looking at. Education is first, then followed by economic development and employment opportunities for our people.

S: Education is your first priority. What would your feelings toward contracting school?

I: As the Indian people become knowledgeable in education roles, I think that the Indian people should run its own school system, whether this is by contract, or whatever. I think that the Indian people should have the final say-so as to what they want in their schools. And if this is the route that the Indian people want to take, then I believe it would be the best for them.

S: You said that you would like to see a junior college, or something like that?

I: Community college, yes.

S: We don't have that now, do we?

I: No, we don't.

S: Where would it be located at?

I: Well, we could make use of the facilities we have already. You see, we really don't have to have new buildings for this kind of setting. The community college concept is a concept where existing facilities could be used, as well as existing facilities could be used. So, these are areas that we can look into, and we're already looking into it, hoping that, in time, that we could bring about this kind of thing. It'll be a lot easier for the people if they were going to Meridian Junior College or to Mississippi State Campus for night classes or so on. We could have these right on campus here, and just bring in the instructors to teach within the school setting. I think it's a viable concept. I think that we have the capabilities here just to make better use of the facilities we have already.

S: What about the new building? How do you think about the new hospital being built?

I: Yes. This is called the Choctaw Health Center, or Health Facility, because it will be more than a hospital. It will be a preventative type of health delivery system as well as a facility for people who are ill to stay in—which we normally refer to as a hospital. So, I think the concept is good. I think that we have health programs already within the Tribe that we could utilize to bring about a preventative kind of thing. Instead of people getting sick and going to the hospital, we can, I think, prevent some of these illnesses by making use of the programs that we have.

S: Can any other Indians come here if they get sick or something like—?

I: If they're Indians and are serviced by a service unit in any part of the country, they're eligible for services, provided they're serviced by the federal government.

S: What are they going to do with the old hospital?

I: We are looking at several possibilities. One of the stronger ones that I think, and one that I agree with, is to develop that old hospital into a training facility. And this training facility could be used by schools, could be used by travel groups, it could be used even by United Southeastern Tribes for training purposes. Conferences and workshops could be held there, too. So, we are looking at the facility as maybe a training facility for our people.

S: When are they gonna move into the new hospital?

I: The opening date is January 1, 1976.

S: Is there going to be some new staff coming in?

I: Yes. We'll retain what we have at the old school, old hospital, but we're also adding fifty new positions. These will be any position from janitorial aide on into nurses and doctors. Professionally employable persons.

S: How many patients can they handle in a clinic?

I: Well, a clinic could handle almost any number, but the hospital proper would be about forty beds in there.

S: What about the new Tribal building? When's it going to be ready?

I: We want to move into it October 1, and the contractor tells us that it will be ready October 1. So, around October 1, we'll move all of our administration in this building into that new building, and then this building here will be utilized by other departments—by the Tribal government. By administration, I mean my office, plus my secretary's, the personnel office, the finance office, and bookkeeping office. We'll have the communications branch. We'll also have property and

supplies. We'll have the administrative assistant. We'll have the office for the Vice-Chief. These will all be in the front part. The back part will be unfinished, because we are looking at various possibilities for use of the back portion. One I'm thinking of is a library—a public library for the adults, and maybe something for the juveniles also. But there is a need for a public library here on the reservation for people who do night classes, who need to do research after working hours and so on. They need a place where they can study, where they can do some reference materials research. So that's a strong possibility I'm looking at. Also, on this end of the back part, I want to develop an arts and crafts, museum-type building. We have two large rooms there that are unfinished and hopefully we can develop these into either a library or an arts and crafts shop. Right in the middle will be a Tribal council room, also. Hopefully, around October 1 we'll be moving there, and on October 14 we want to have an open house for the facility, so the people who wish to walk through and see what we have can do so. Our open house is tentatively planned for October 14. We'd like to welcome all the students, you know, from Choctaw Central area to come and visit us at that time.

S: Let me see, what other new buildings are you considering building, and what purpose are they for?

I: I think as far as new office buildings, this is about where we'll be. There is talk now, in a long-range plan, that we would have an office building built and then leased to the Bureau for a Choctaw Agency. Which would be next to the Tribal administration building in the valley there. And that's in a long-range plan, but I

don't know how soon that's going to be. It will depend on the funding itself. So as far as office space, I think we have about what we would need.

S: What about some of the other buildings, besides being offices, like a new home for ...?

I: Yes, we have a congregate house for the elderly that's being developed right behind the new hospital. It will house about fourteen elderly couples, and it's a beautiful plan that we've looked at, and the drawing was also beautiful. The Housing Authority will have its office there, and also the people will stay in there, have cafeteria-style food for them, even as, you know, as they need it, maid service for them. But this **pertains to** the elderly. Now, this is not a nursing home. The housing for the elderly is just that—it will be a house for the elderly. The nursing home, we would not be covering. That will be within the hospital facilities. Then, the usual housing projects will continue. We have seventy-five already in the books for this fall and next year, we have two hundred more planned. So, after we get through with the two hundred houses, I think we'll have adequate housing for our Indian people.

S: Can you comment on the employment of the Choctaw people?

I: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, the employment picture is really bleak for our people. What few programs we operate here at a Tribal level is what most people use as their employment. And there are times, you know, when these funds are not available. When this happens, you know, we face unemployment with a larger number of people. But we have just been funded for the Title I, Title II, Title

III, and Title VI CETA funds, so we'll be back in operation on those funds hopefully within the next week.

S: These programs, do they offer a skill, or kind of a skill or a job to, you know, to sometimes go out of the reservation looking for another job?

I: Yes, CETA program, as I refer to it, is by title a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. So, the act itself specifies that whatever program we develop should be used as a skills training kind of thing for these people. So, once they get out of the program, they'll be able to go into permanent type of employment with public or whatever agencies.

S: How should a young Choctaw get involved in Choctaw affairs?

I: I'm glad you asked that question, because at the last community meeting, we had ... as I recall, no Choctaw youths attend the meeting. And this was one of the meetings where I think a lot of knowledge and information can be gained by any person. I was at the last community meeting for this community, and several questions were discussed—several problems were discussed. Recreation was discussed, education was discussed, employment was discussed, problems with schools were discussed. So, these are things that if, you know, a young person attended these meetings, they could hear quite a bit about what's going on in the community. So, I would say that involvement in the community clubs would be a good step. Also, another area would be to attend our council meetings that we have periodically. Our next council meeting coming up is October 14. And this is an open council meeting. The only closed meetings we have as far as the council is concerned is in matters **that refer to** personnel matters. So far, though, we

have not had any personnel matters to come before the council, and all of our meetings have been open. Anyone who wants to attend is welcome to attend the council meetings. And then, for additional information or knowledge that you want to gain from any program, we'd welcome a person to come in and just visit with the program people, the program directors or whatever. Just come on in and visit with them, ask them—there are various questions you may have about the programs. So, there are many ways of getting involved in the things that are going on in the Choctaw reservation. You can attend meetings, you can have individual conferences, whatever.

S: When will the industrial park complex get started?

I: Well, it's been there for about four or five years, and we really haven't found an industry to come in. We're right now looking at a couple of industries. One looks favorable. But again, it will depend on how the council reacts to these proposals. The one we're looking at right now is one prefab industry for the industrial complex. This industry would manufacture prefab housing products. I don't know how we'll go on that, but that particular one is rather favorable. We're always looking for any industry that might be, you know, ready to move and come down to the reservation.

S: Nanih Waiya is part of the Bicentennial. Is the Tribe making any plans for 1976 Bicentennial year?

I: Not at this point, but we are looking at some of the information that's coming down, and we hope to come about with some kind of program for the Bicentennial observations. But at this point we have nothing planned as such.

S: You talked about the arts and crafts. You're really involved—I mean, kind of worried about the heritage, and all the culture of the Choctaw people?

I: Yes, I've been concerned about the culture of our people, because in my earlier discussions with people, it was mentioned to me that the arts and crafts of our people are dying. That the ones who are involved in it at this point are elderly people, and once these Elders leave us, who is there to carry on this kind of thing? And based on that, we want to revive the arts and crafts of our people. I also want to retrain some of the traditions of our people, because this is something that we have that we should be proud of. And I think that one way for us to do that would be to get programs in that relate to this kind of thing, and maybe bring in some other Indian groups that have their heritage. This way we could look at some of the things that the Indian people have. Also, gain from them as to how they retained some of these things that are slowly dying out for our people. So, arts and crafts is an area that I'd like to see revived as well as some of our dances, our Indian music, our Indian art. These things, I think we need to revive.

S: Do you think the school would bring back the Indian course? Like, they taught the Choctaw people how to sing—you know, to keep their own culture a chance, and all. 'Cause, this year they don't have that anymore, and—

I: I wish they would, I wish they would. I thought, you know, that the school was carrying on with that particular course. But if not then we should.

S: Would you like to see the arts and crafts being taught in the school?

I: It could be, but I think we might run into problems on credits or units for the students. It could probably be, you know, given as an elective or an extracurricular, but not for credit. I think once the students are given an opportunity, I think they might take advantage of it. And this way, you know, we'd revive the crafts.

S: Where do you think it all begins, with the elderly or with, you know, to retain the cultural heritage?

I: It has to come from the elderly. They're the ones who know. And I think we need to respect our Elders to a point where we need to learn from them. They may not be educated as such, but I think they have a lot of knowledge that we can gain from them. And this applies to the arts and crafts area. They're the ones who do it. They're the ones who retained it from their elders. And once they're gone, I think they're going to be gone. I think they have a lot to offer us.

S: Would you consider building a big museum, or something? Another something to, you know, so that something, in some area or something like that?

I: Yes, in the long-range plan we have plans for a museum which will be built in connection with the reservoir program. You know, the reservoir is being planned within the next five years. And out of this reservoir would be the tourist trade areas. We'll have some tourist merchandise which would be sold near the reservation, near the reservoir, and so on. So along with that we do have long-range plans for a museum which will house all the old artifacts that might have about our Indian people. Also, an arts and crafts shop will be built within it.

S: The reservoir—is it for just recreation, or economics?

I: Well, we look at it both. The reservoir can be a recreation for our people, and we'll have the southern edge of the reservoir that bounds on our reservation. So, we'll have access to that, and hopefully there's no cost to us. And then it'll be economics in areas where the tourists will come in. We'll probably charge them a fee to make use of the reservoir. So, we're looking at it from both ends.

S: What are some of the major problems with the Choctaw people for holding jobs?

I: Okay, I'm glad you mentioned that, because I think one of our main problems—and I hate to say it, because I'm Choctaw myself—but the fact is that we have problems with alcohol. It is, I think, one of the things that keep us behind or back. People have problems with employment because of some alcohol-related problems. When we look at the figures for people who are working, most of our absentees occur on Mondays and Fridays. On Mondays because of the hangover they may be occurring over the weekend. Or maybe people have been out all weekend, and now just taking a rest on Monday. And our figures show that we do have that problem. And also, a Friday after payday is also another high day for absentees. So, these tell me that people really aren't concerned about their particular jobs. I think they're more concerned about what their immediate satisfactions would be, and this happens to relate to alcohol. So, I'd say the major problem we have on the reservation is the use of alcohol—or misuse of alcohol.

S: Do you think the alcohol involves the students, too?

I: I think so. Again, I don't have the statistics on that, but I think if we really went down to the basic reasons for student absentees, we might find that this is true.

Again, though, it all goes back to the home. You have a good home, then more likely, this problem won't exist. But we do have homes that aren't that secure. Most homes—maybe I shouldn't say most, I probably should say some homes—have both parents drinking. The children are left pretty much on their own. When this happens, you know that the problems of the students will be reflected in the schools.

S: Is there any program or anything that kind of helping the alcoholics or something?

I: Yes, we have what you call the Alcoholism and Mental Health Program operated by the Tribe here. But again, this is more involved here, so I'm not so sure we're really catching or getting to the people who need the services, because our programs are voluntary. We could not force them to take advantage of these programs even though we have them. But when a person comes in and is referred, then we have a program that will help them. We even have programs from the state mental health groups that are free to us, and we can make use of these at Weems Mental Health Center at Meridian is one of them.

S: What do they do with the little kids, little children, if their parents are, you know, if they don't stay home a lot, or just leave them behind, what do they do?

I: We have just started a child abuse program with the Tribe here. It's about a month old now, we're still looking for a director. But that program is designed to bring about a team of professionals who would consult with the parents. After the child abuse has been reported, and investigations are made, then the professional team would come and confer with the parents as to what's best for

the child. So, along with the parents, they would decide as to where the child would go. Most of the time it'd probably be to a foster home where better care can be taken of the children. These are areas where we start going into, and the professional team concept, I think, is a sound concept. Heretofore, you know, we've been—or the social services would be the ones who have the responsibility for finding out where these children should be placed. But now we would have a team to confer and also to concur on where these children should go.

S: Can you tell us more about the Indian housing? How does a Choctaw go about getting on or off the reservation? Paid-for housing?

I: Okay, the Tribe operates a housing project under the auspices of the Choctaw Housing Authority. What we usually do is that the person who wants to rent or lease a house would apply to the Choctaw Housing Authority. Based on an application, the housing authority determines who gets what house, because it depends on whether it's a two-bedroom or three-bedroom—whatever. So, the housing authority is the one that determines who gets what house. We have the low-rent housing as well as the housing improvement program for our people. The low-rent housing goes to those people who are within a certain income, and then the housing improvement program operates primarily on the individual taking care of his own home, doing some part of it, and then just paying the rent.

S: Are there any restrictions for non-Indians to hunt or fish on the reservation?

I: Not at this point. At one time I think that they did require that they obtain hunting and fishing licenses, you know, to hunt and fish on the reservation lands. But I'm

not sure at this point whether that's employed, because there was some question about that. The question, I think, was who does the enforcing? And the enforcement does not go through law and order. The enforcement has to go through the state Game and Fish Commission. So, the question there, I think is still there, is who does this? Even though we may require that person to have a hunting and fishing license, we really can't enforce that with our local law and order. The state Game and Fish Commission is the one who has to enforce it, and there's been a question of jurisdiction.

S: What's your major goal for the Tribe for the next four years?

I: For the next three and half years, just like I mentioned earlier, I'd like to bring in the education level at least to the national average, which is eighth grade level. This can be done only through the students remaining in school, finishing as high a grade as they can. It also involves upgrading our adults who are already out of school, but yet can go back and get an equivalent of a high school education through the GED. And then for those that are in colleges, we'd like to bring them on through colleges and universities so that they will upgrade our education level. So that is an area that I'm looking at, because without education we really can't do much. I feel that strongly and my main thrust will be to education.

S: The community college is going to be just for Indians?

I: No. When we get funding for that, it would have to be open to anyone. And I like the idea of open to anyone. Because after a person's been through high school, they want to go into additional courses or whatever, it should be open to anyone.

S: Do you have any comments on Choctaw and local non-Indian relationships?

I: Yes. The relationship between the local Indians and the local non-Indians I think has improved, certainly, in the years that I've been here. In the [19]60s, the relationship was not good. Because again, the desegregation movement was going on, and the local people were opposed to the idea that the federal government was encroaching upon them, and because of the [19]60s, weren't doing much of anything. But since then, I think the attitude of the people has changed. I think that people now look at each other as people. There are some areas I think we still need to improve. That is in the employment area for the local town. We do not have Indians working within the stores there in town, but I think in time, this will come. We look at the Chamber of Commerce as a means of bringing about this change, and this can be accomplished. Because about three years ago, I worked with the Chamber of Commerce in providing job opportunities for the Choctaw Indian youth. We had about twenty-seven students—high school age—to work in town that summer. And I think this is an area that we can go into yet, and hopefully, we'll be able to do this. I know it's possible, because the Chamber of Commerce has been in touch with me and wanting to get closer working relationship with me. I think that this is coming. We will change.

S: Do you have any comments on any subjects?

I: Yes. I have one that I like to tell about every time I get a chance, and that is to talk about our Indian people. I find that in my travels through the state that people here in the state know that there are Indians in Mississippi. In my visit to the Delta area, into central Mississippi, and to the Gulf Coast, people are wanting

more and more information about our Indian people, because we are now in the limelight. People have now found that there are Indians in Mississippi, and now they are trying to get close to the Indian situation. Just like two weeks ago when the bilingual requirement on voting came for Neshoba County, the AP writer from Jackson called, and the first thing he said was, "I didn't know there were Indians in Mississippi." So this, I think, told us that we do have a lot of public relations work to be done here in the state to tell them that we are Indians here, that we do have our heritage, we do have our reservation here, and I think more and more we need to tell them about what we operate here, programs and so on. So, there's a lot of public relations we can do, even within our state. Also, as I go to national meeting, people are surprised that I come from a lone Tribe in Mississippi. They always tell me that they didn't know that there were Indians living here as pure as the Choctaw Indian people. So this, I think, tells us that we do need to go and tell our story to other people throughout the country.

S: How do you feel about Nanih Waiya Magazine?

I: Yes, I have positive thinking on Nanih Waiya Magazine, because as I mentioned earlier—I don't know if it was to you or someone else—that we started the first paper for the Pearl River school at the time I was going to school here. And this was in the dark ages, but we started it with the idea that we would tell something about our people, about our legends. Somehow this school paper never did go off. It died down, I think, after a while. But I was the first editor of that, and this was the thinking behind it when we started the paper. We retained those legends, those stories, that we knew about our people, and let it reflect in the

paper so people would know about it, our students would know about it. So, I like the idea. I think that it's something that once it's cut in, it will be here. We can preserve it for future generations. So, I think it's up to the Nanih Waiya staff to do a good job, and to keep at least a couple of copies preserved somewhere, so in years to come, people can look at it and know the kind of work we did, and also, they'll know about our heritage.

S: Nanih Waiya is part of the Bicentennial, so the Tribe can use it as part of the Bicentennial, the Nanih Waiya ...

I: Yes, we'd like to. Good. We'll do that.

S: Do you have any more comments?

I: No, I don't, except that I always like to be interviewed. [Laughter] I like people to come and ask me about things, because they'll give me some more information as to what all I need to read up on and get briefed on and so on. And I've enjoyed this visit with you.

S: Okay. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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