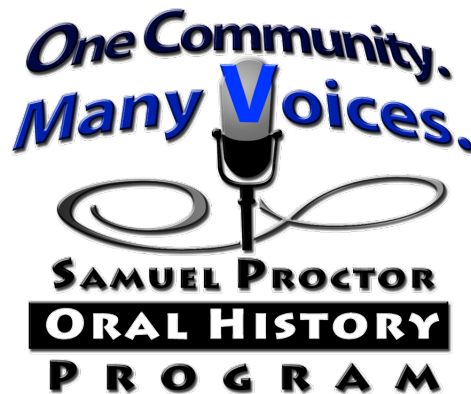


# Phillip Martin

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project  
MISS CHOC-029**

**Interview by:**

**Harold Billie, Bradley Alex, and Austin Tubby  
January 21, 1974**



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**MISS CHOC 029 Phillip Martin**  
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**  
**Interviewed by Bradley Alex, Austin Tubby, and Harold Billie on January 21, 1974**  
**20 minutes | 10 pages**

**Abstract:** Phillip Martin is the chairman for the Choctaw Tribal government, having served for almost ten years. He first became interested in working for the council in 1955 and was interested in working with the people of the community. He speaks about the Choctaw's self-determination, working to create a better future for themselves and free from the influence of the federal government. He helped to organize the United Southeastern Tribes in 1968 and has served as president of the organization for three years.

**Keywords:** [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi--Choctaw; Politics and government; Tribal history]

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
**PROGRAM**  
**University of Florida**

MISS CHOC 029

Interviewee: Phillip Martin

Interviewer: Bradley Alex, Austin Tubby, and Harold Billie

Date of Interview: January 21, 1974

B: Today's Monday, January 21, 1974. Today we're interviewing Mr. Phillip Martin on Tribal government. The interviewers today is Bradley Alex, Austin Tubby, and Harold Billie.

[Break in recording]

B: Who organized the Tribal government?

M: The question is how did the Tribal government was organized, right?

B: Mmhm.

M: Well, from about 1830, which was the last treaty between the Choctaws and the United States—the 1830 treaty known as Dancing Rabbit Creek. That abolished the Tribal organization, Tribal government here in Mississippi. Those Choctaws who moved to Oklahoma, moved over to Oklahoma as a Nation. So, from 1830 to 1945, Mississippi Choctaws was without a formal Tribal organization, or what we know as Tribal government during that time period. So, 1934, Congress passed a law saying that any recognized Indian Tribe in the country, or formally organized, can adopt a constitution and bylaws. And so, Choctaws here adopted one in April 1945. It is recognized and certified by the U.S. government. So, the answer, I guess, in short, would be the people themselves organized the Tribal government in 1945 under the laws set up by Congress.

B: Who makes the constitution and bylaws?

M: Well, the people themselves adopted the constitution and bylaws. And that's what we are operating under now.

B: How about the early officials?

M: Well, the constitutional bylaw calls for a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, and treasurer. Those are the official of the Tribal council. When you mean early officials, you talking about ...?

B: Name who was the first chairman, or something.

M: I'm not sure, but I think it was Joe Chitto. I'm not positive on who was the first chairman. But I'm thinking it's Joe Chitto.

B: How does the Tribal government operate?

M: Well, the Tribal council is the governing body, and they set up the rules and regulations and make policies, so forth. But then they have a Tribal administration, which I'm responsible for the management of it. I'm responsible to the council for it. So, you can say that you have a Tribal council, a governing body, and then you have a Tribal administration which implements and carry out the various programs that we got now.

B: Did the removal of some of the Choctaws from Mississippi in the 1930s have any effect on Tribal government or something?

M: 1830?

B: Mmhm.

M: Yeah. I mean the Choctaw Nation moved to Oklahoma in 1830 and those of our people that were left here was without formal Tribal government.

B: We'd like to know the duties of the chairman.

M: Well. [Laughter] The duties of the chairman is pretty broad and widespread. I mean, a person doing his job can be kept busy quite often all the time, but the main thing is to try to come up with programs that's going to provide

employment—try to improve the school system, try to get programs for housing, industrial development on the reservation. All these things we're working on now. But the main sum of these duties is to conduct the meetings, council meetings, to represent the Tribe at various conferences or functions, and we deal quite often with local and state and federal officials. So, he's overall representative and spokesman for the Tribe.

B: Who is able to hold office in the—

M: Why, anybody who is eligible to become a council member and become officers. Any member of the Tribe over twenty-one years of age is eligible.

B: Could it be a woman or a man?

M: Yeah, it doesn't make no difference.

B: What is the qualifications for it?

M: Just membership. You have to be enrolled membership and qualified to run for councilman or any other position. You know, I'm not saying any old member. You have to have a certain amount of blood. Our constitution calls for one half or better, half or more.

B: Does the candidate have to be a resident of the state of Mississippi and a member of your band?

M: Yeah, the candidate has to be a resident of one of the Indian communities, or a voting resident of one community.

B: What about the election committees? Is there any—

M: Yeah, we have election committees set up, and we have rules and regulations governing the elections, and the election committee carries that out.

B: What about the elections, when are they held?

M: Well, every two years we have—the term of office for all councilmen and officials are two years. The next election will be in June 1975.

B: How many times—let me see—can a candidate run?

M: There is no limitation. Succeed himself as many times as he can get elected.

B: And there's no any age limit or anything?

M: Twenty-one years old, but no high end.

B: What about the education? Education have to do with running for the council?

M: No, education is not a qualification. We have not written education in there as a qualification because it would be unconstitutional. Everybody has the same rights regardless of whether he's educated or noneducated. Because what counts is how the people vote. You know, you can have a Ph.D. and if they don't like him, they are not going to vote for him. They might have somebody not quite educated enough, you know, they might vote for him. So, it's a freedom, it's a choice of the people regardless of their educational qualification.

B: How did you became interested in becoming a chairman?

M: Well, one time I came home and I accidentally went to observe a council meeting. That was back in 1955, and I just checked into it. I knew that they need help, so I just start working with them. That's all. [Laughter] Got interested, and started working in my community, started working with the council and people. Pretty soon I was involved.

B: How many times have you been chosen chairman of the Tribe?

M: How many times? This is my five term—five two-year term, so that I'm on my ninth year. [Laughter] Of course, I've been working here longer than that. I've been working with the Tribe since 1955. [19]57. So, what would that make it? Seventeen, somewhere there, seventeen years.

[Break in recording]

B: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

M: Oh, there's not too much to tell about myself. [Laughter] Well, I think I'll give you one of my campaign things and you can see my background a little bit, and what things I've been doing and so forth. I've got it here somewhere. You gonna do a write-up or something?

B: Yes, it's for Nanih Waiya Magazine.

M: Yeah. There's nothing more than just concern with people, you know. I got to working in it, met a lot of people, and I knew that a lot of work needed to be done around here. So, I just start working continuously.

B: What do you have to say about self-determination?

M: Well, I think a lot of the people do not understand the term of—we call it Choctaw self-determination. They think it's ... some of them think it's termination, you know, of government service, but really, it's not. It's very simple: you like to determine every day, you like to determine for yourself what you gonna do in it. You might decide you're going to town this afternoon, and you determine that yourself. But maybe if your dormitory attendant said, "Well, we're going to town today." You may not want to go to town, but you're going to town. So, you didn't determine that yourself. When you do it on a Tribal level, what does this Choctaw

Tribe want to do, you know, ten years from now, twenty years from now? You do this by planning ahead, whatever it is that you want to do. So, self-determination would be just determining the future for yourself and be able to manage that, make that happen, rather than depending on government or somebody else to do it for you.

B: What was the first office you held?

M: I was councilman, when I started I was a Tribal councilman. First two years. Next term they elected me to be chairman, and I stayed there for six years. You'll see that in the stuff I gave you.

B: That self-determination—that's for the future, isn't it?

M: Well, it's now.

B: It's now?

M: Self-determination can be now, but self-determination is planning in my definition. You plan what you want to do. If we didn't practice some self-determination, we wouldn't be doing what we're doing here now, because government always been telling Indians what to do. They'd like to continue that. But we got some young leaders in the country now that want this, and they don't want to continuously be told by government official what to do. Then government is itself saying that the Indians ought to be able to determine for themselves what they want to do, so, they're saying the Indians ought to make self-determination. But a lot of our people, especially the older group, have a lot of difficulty in understanding the word self-determination. They get it mixed up with other things. They don't understand it. But we can't wait, we gotta go now. One of these times it'll be you



guys that's gonna be—you know, it's gonna be your turn. [Laughter] I got a period to go through, and then you guys come along and pick up what's left, what we're doing. It's I think a good future for Choctaws right now, because we got a lot of things going. If you get yourself ready, you get yourself interested in the Tribe, you can be a part of the people that make determination. In this case this Tribal council is making determination.

B: And you think that Tribal council is ready for the self-determination?

M: Yeah. We've talked a lot about this kind of thing in council meetings. They all agree. They might not know everything about what needs to be done, but they see progress that's going on now, and they know that we didn't do anything until we started doing things for ourselves. We've been going to Washington many, many times—I still go. I mean, that's how come I'm gone most of the time because I got to keep working on some things here that we've got going or need, stuff like this. Nobody can sit in this chair here and stay here and get everything done, you got to go somewhere and get it done.

B: You said you were serving the Southeastern Tribes?

M: Yeah, we got an organization called United Southeast Tribes that's made up of the Southeastern Tribes under Department of Interior. Like Cherokees, Seminoles, Miccosukees, Choctaws, Senecas and so forth.

[Break in recording]

M: That will give you a better picture on that if you want. It's hard to making pictures in here, there's a lot of reflection in here.

B: Are some of the White people against self-determination?

M: You mean White government people?

B: Mmhm.

M: Yeah, I'm pretty sure most of them would be against losing their job. Many of them are primarily interested in maintaining their job for what they're doing here. And what we're saying here is the Choctaws ought to manage some of these programs here and hire the people that they want, rather than them coming in here as government employees, and we don't have nothing to say whether they come or where they go. When they hear about a Tribe taking over a program, they get nervous, because we may hire some other people that can do a better job. This doesn't mean that we not going to hire White people. We may hire White people that can work better for us, you know, answer to us. Government employees, White or anybody else, Indians, they're not answerable to the Tribal council. So, they do pretty well what they want to do, and we can't do nothing about it. Yet they're getting paid monies that's supposed to come here and help the Choctaw people. So, they don't like that.

B: [inaudible 17:28]

M: Oh, I helped organize the United Southeast Tribes in 1968, I think, and I've been president of that organization for three years.

B: [inaudible 17:54]

M: Well, I'm involved with a lot of other organizations, you know. I'm working with the United Southeast Tribes—not working, but a member of the board of directors, working with Haskell Indian Junior College. These types of things. And because we are interested in what the United Southeast Tribes is doing, and we also got

students in Haskell, you know. So, we're concerned with them. Try to make Haskell into a good school.

B: When did self-determination develop, uh, start?

M: Self-determination has always been here. Where you have any group of people, self-determination is here, except sometimes you have difficulty making self-determination work as a body, as a group. And every day all of these people around here make some kind of determination for themselves, but we have never worked together as a Tribe to make self-determination work. We're doing it now, I think. You guys will have an opportunity to do it too. So Now get your dictionary and read what self-determination is. [Phone rings]

[Break in recording]

B: What about the Indians that used to live in Mississippi but moved out of state to another city, like Chicago or Dallas? Could they still be a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians?

M: Yeah, they are, they're a member no matter where they're at.

B: How about the children if they're born?

M: Yes, if they register them here, they will be. They have to get registered.

B: How many constitutional bylaws does the Tribe have?

M: Just one. You have it in there now, in the packet.

B: How about your family? How many daughters and sons do you have?

M: [Laughter] Of course, you all know I've got two daughters. [Laughter] Of course, they're a junior and senior this year.

B: That's all folks.

[End of interview]

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