

Museum honors Oklahoma tribes

OHSWEKEN — Last week I mentioned my trip down to Texas. On the way back we stopped for the night at Muskogee, Okla. This was fortunate for me because I got to visit the Five Civilized Tribes Museum before we drove on the next day.

The Five Civilized Tribes was the name given to the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Seminoles and Chickasaw Indians by the Americans. Before Oklahoma became a state, each of these five Indian nations had their own laws, courts, judges and territory. The Americans began to refer to them as tribes, rather than nations, in order to undermine their legitimacy and make it easier to take their land.

On the wall of the museum was a large, striking picture of a man dressed in black. He was blindfolded and sitting with his back against a tree. On his chest was pinned a white cloth, shaped like a heart. According to an accompanying explanation, this was Pullmusky, the last man to die by Seminole law — on July 18, 1896 — before Oklahoma became a state.

Pullmusky had killed a man in a fight. He was sentenced to death by a Seminole Indian court. He was given two months to return home, presumably to put his affairs in order. On the appointed day the people gathered for the execution. When his name was called he bravely stepped out of the crowd. He was blindfolded and the white cloth was pinned over his heart.

According to Seminole law, a condemned man could select his own executioner. Pullmusky selected his best friend to fire the rifle. He was a crack shot and could be

Our Town

George
Beaver

Dec. 27/89



depended upon to be quick and merciful. Just before he was shot someone with a primitive camera took his picture. He looks relaxed and unafraid in the picture, like a man who knows he is doing the right thing. Indians with the integrity and trustworthiness of Pullmusky were not uncommon long ago. "Honest Injuns" amazed the white settlers so much that the phrase became commonplace.

Another display featured the Cherokee baseball pitcher Ben Tincup. Ben was the first player from Oklahoma to pitch a perfect game. He played for Philadelphia Phillies in 1915 when they won the pennant.

The art gallery on the upper floor of the museum building featured Plains Indian art. There are many carvings and paintings by the gifted artist Jerome Tiger. Mr. Tiger was killed in an accident at the age of 26 about 20 years ago. He was a prolific artist who would probably have become well-known all over North America by now, had he lived.

If I ever return to Muskogee, you can bet I'll revisit the Five Civilized Tribes Museum.

Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the region. George Beaver is a Six Nations reserve resident and was a teacher and principal on the Six Nations and New Credit reserves for 33 years.