

THIS LAND OF PLENTY

An article in the *Sapulpa Daily Herald* several years ago featured a description of the area originally published in 1906, just before Oklahoma statehood.

With 3,500 residents, Sapulpa was billed as “the northern gateway to the fertile plains of the Creek Nation,” where the water was pure and the climate ideal. Enterprising farmers could produce ample crops of cotton, corn, wheat, and peaches while watching their cattle, sheep, hogs, and poultry grow fat in this “land of plenty.”

An idyllic depiction, to be sure, but it does give you a sense of how the *Mvskoke* people had adapted to life in a new place after a century of strife and upheaval.

Every *Mvskoke* knows about the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of southeastern Indians from their homelands to Indian Territory. Most historical accounts of this period focus on the injustice of the removal policy and the hardships of the journey, which killed around 3,500 *Mvskokes*.

I’ve often wondered about those who survived—some with little more than the clothes on their backs—and the challenge of starting from scratch in a new land.

The removal treaty of 1832 required the U.S. government to provide them with food and other basic necessities “for one year after their arrival at their new homes,” barely enough time to settle in. They had to be completely self-sufficient after just one growing season, and if the crops failed or the livestock ran off, their options were very limited. Love’s, Braum’s, and Sonic had yet to set up shop in *Mvskoke* country.

Some of the plants and animals they found in this new territory were familiar from the old country. But others were undoubtedly novel, strange, and possibly dangerous.

It must have been an eye-opening experience for those *Mvskokes* who lived off the land. And in the nineteenth century, that included just about everyone.

The first treaty negotiated by *Mvskoke* leaders in Indian Territory was signed at Fort Gibson in 1833. It laid out boundaries for the new Creek Nation, situated between lands already claimed by the Choctaws and the Cherokees.

The Choctaw border followed the Canadian River, an effective barrier. But the Cherokee border was mostly a series of invisible straight lines running overland, and much of it remained unmarked for years.

Finally, in 1848, the U.S. government commissioned a crew of topographical engineers to survey the Creek-Cherokee boundary. They spent the summers of 1849 and 1850 measuring and marking the border, and both expeditions included S. W. Woodhouse, a young medical doctor with an interest in natural history. His journals and reports are among the earliest written accounts of agricultural practices in Indian Territory.





Setting out from Fort Gibson, Woodhouse was quickly impressed by the farms he visited. “The Indians here have as fine corn as I have ever seen before,” he wrote just a month into the first summer. Many *Mvskokes* also tended orchards, and he happened upon a family cutting and drying some “very fine” peaches for their winter stores. Near what is now the city of Tulsa, the expedition was passed by a group of Indians whose horses were loaded down with buckeye root, which they were going to use for catching fish in the Verdigris River.

Woodhouse saw plenty of domesticated animals and wild game as well: grouse, mallards, turkeys, deer, and even buffalo. The *Mvskoke* people he met along the way were generous to a fault, repeatedly offering food, supplies, and hospitality to their visitors from the States.

At a farm near *Cēyahv* tribal town, the lunch menu included cornbread, sweet potatoes, stewed peaches, salt pork, and “a drink made of hominy,” probably *safke*. An afternoon stop at a *Mvskoke* homestead near present-day McClure Park in Tulsa yielded a refreshing snack of watermelon. The hosts of a funeral dinner served various meats, vegetables, breads, and desserts to more than three hundred guests, and Woodhouse returned to camp “having been much gratified with my visits.”

Maybe it's not so surprising after all that, half a century later, a Sapulpa booster would praise the Creek Nation as a land of plenty. But if *Mvskoke* country was fertile, this was at least in part the harvest of *Mvskoke* character, cooperation, and hard work.



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