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The Feast of Saint David Pendleton Oakerhater

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wonderfully plump, juicy blackberries to be made into a cobbler. I can almost close my eyes and smell it all now.

How everyone put up with all of us children was beyond me. We kept darting in and out of the kitchen, most assuredly getting into everyone's way. The aunts would only take so much of it, then send us on our way, occasionally hollering for an uncle to come and take charge of us.

Of course, the uncles were so busy playing horseshoes, or sitting idly on the porch enjoying one another's company, that they seldom intervened for too long.

I can almost hear the stories being bandied back and forth—stories of those days when our parents were young. "Do you remember when" stories were always fascinating to me. Maybe because it was hard to imagine my parents as ever having been young.

Finally, at long last, the table was set and food was ready. The grownups sat at the massive old pedestal table in the dining room, while all of the children sat at folding tables or anywhere possible. I didn't care. I would have eaten outside by myself, just as long as I got my share of the feast we had smelled all afternoon.

"More food? How about more chicken?" One or another of the adults would occasionally break the grown-up conversation to check on the children.

The whole house seemed to buzz with happy conversation. These were, after all, families who seldom got to see each other—once every few years, if that. There was so much to catch up on: job changes, household changes, and, of course, "I can't believe how much your children have grown!"

The meal finished, uncles wandered outside to continue earlier-begun games of horseshoes, or just to sit and relax. Children were given the dubious honor of clearing the table. Aunts crowded into the kitchen under the guise of washing the dishes, but I always thought more talking went on than work.

How many times do we all look back fondly on our childhoods and wish for that carefree, better life? Families were closer, love seemed deeper, and to say the least, food tasted better. The Colonel has nothing on the fried chicken family feasts we had in 'the good old days'. ■

The Feast of Saint David Pendleton Oakerhater

BY ALVIN O. TURNER



of the
most
unusual
festivals

in the state takes place late each summer in western Oklahoma. The unusual elements consist of: tribal ceremonies containing most elements of a typical pow wow combined with traditional Christian symbols; a church's recognition of a man whose

early promise was never fulfilled and whose achievements were then abandoned by his church; and, the recognition of a former Cheyenne warrior and prisoner of war as a saint in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States.

This unusual event has taken place for the last six years at Roman Nose State Park on the weekend closest to the first Sunday in September. That is the date set aside by the church for recognition of the sainthood of David Pendleton Oakerhater who was added to the Episcopal calendar of lesser saints in 1986.

Oakerhater, whose name meant Sun Dancer or Making Medicine, first gained notoriety in the 1870s. He was regarded as a leader among Cheyenne who continued their struggle against the white man. His activities in the Red River War, 1873-74, caused him to be imprisoned along with seventy-three other Plains Indian warriors at Fort Marion, Florida.

The Army originally intended to imprison the warriors for life. However, Captain Richard Pratt took charge of the prisoners and began introducing programs to produce their rehabilitation. Oakerhater and others responded to Pratt's efforts and were soon recognized for their mastery of basic education skills and in other endeavors, particularly art. Pratt supplied the prisoners with paper and other materials which they used to create drawings that depicted their lives on the plains as well as their experiences at Fort Marion. The Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City recently featured an exhibit, "Beyond the Prison Gates: The Fort Marion Experience," which illustrates continued scholarly interest in the prisoners' art. Besides their value as cultural-historical documents, many scholars argue that the drawings represent the beginnings of the traditions and forms reflected in the subsequent development of Native American art of today.

The most important immediate result of the drawings was attracting public attention to the prisoners and to Pratt's rehabilitative efforts. Pratt used such publicity and other evidence of the Indians' achievements to promote further educational efforts among the Plains tribes. His efforts eventually led to the establishment of Carlisle

Institute and subsequent expansion of Indian education.

Upon their release from prison in 1878, many of the Fort Marion prisoners served as the nucleus for Pratt's first official class of students. Oakerhater and three other former prisoners—Okestehi, a Cheyenne; Zotom, a Kiowa; and Taawayite, a Comanche—continued their education in New York. They had converted to the Episcopal faith while at Fort Marion and were to spend three years in acquiring additional learning and in training as ministers for that church. Their sponsors then expected the four to return to Indian Territory and lead their tribes into Christianity and the white man's way. One symbol of the former warrior's commitment to this new way was the taking of new names; Oakerhater thus became David Pendleton Oakerhater.

Oakerhater and Zotom completed three years of education under the tutelage of John Wick, rector of St. Paul's Church in Park Hill, New York, and were ordained as deacons in the spring of 1881 shortly before their return to their homes. Taawayite completed additional studies at Carlisle with the other former prisoners and was trained as a lay reader. Okestehi died from tuberculosis before completing his education.

In the summer of 1884, Wicks led Oakerhater, Zotom and Taawayite to Indian Territory where they planned to establish ministries among the Plains tribes. Oakerhater initiated the work among the Cheyenne and established the first Sunday school in western Oklahoma. His other efforts met with comparable success and seemed to encourage the hopes of his sponsors who expected the conversion of the Plains Indians to be completed within a generation.

This hope was doomed from the start. The eastern humanitarian and religious groups that supported assimilationist efforts among the tribes overestimated the appeal of the white man's way to many Indian groups. More importantly, much of their program was never fully implemented or did not meet the Indian's needs. Despite demonstrated successes at Carlisle, funding for Indian education never approached adequate levels. Those who managed to acquire an education found that there was little demand for their skills in Indian Territory.

Similarly, the government encouraged the development of farming as an alternative to dependency, but much reservation land was unsuitable for farming. Or, when good land was available, the government failed to supply equipment or even the seed necessary for farming.

Such problems ultimately debilitated the tribes and directly affected Oakerhater's ministry. When he returned to the Cheyenne reservation in 1881, his people welcomed him as the symbol of their hope for the future and responded accordingly to his teaching and example. Three years later he became the symbol of another failed promise. In 1884, John Wicks returned to New York following a bout with illness and increasing discouragement over the church's support for the Indian ministry.

Wicks' departure left Oakerhater and Zotom without a priest to supervise their work. Zotom soon drifted from the ministry but Oakerhater persisted for ten lonely years, continuing to teach his people by precept and example. He concentrated his efforts among students in the Cheyenne and Arapaho boarding schools near El Reno and the Darlington Agency, and had a lasting influence on many young people. However, his authority was limited and did not permit him to offer communion to any converts. His only contact with his church during this time was in one brief return visit by Wicks and occasional correspondence with Wicks and others.

The appointment of David Sanford, an El Reno priest, to head territorial Indian work in 1895 revitalized Oakerhater's ministry, but new problems prevented lasting gains. Oakerhater was particularly productive in his work with students at the Whirlwind Day School near present-day Fay. The government established a school there in 1897 in an effort to replace boarding schools on the reservation. Four years later, federal policy shifted again and the government abandoned the site. Sanford then secured permission for the Episcopal church to maintain a school at the location. This seemed to assure continuation of the church's Indian ministries, but Sanford had also gained the enmity of the local Indian agent.

Work at the school suffered for three years as agents of church and government struggled for control over various localized issues. The Bishop finally dismissed Sanford in 1907 in the hope of ending the dispute. He was partly successful but was then unable to find a reliable priest to replace Sanford. Deaconess Harriet Bedell launched a new ministry in 1911 that lasted for six years. Her efforts enhanced Oakerhater's leading to significant growth of the Cheyenne ministry and continued success at Whirlwind School.

The apparent vitality of the church's ministries to the Cheyenne ended abruptly in 1917. Bedell, like Sanford, had opposed a local Indian agent; more importantly, the government had now decided that its best policy was to encourage the enrollment of Cheyenne students in public schools rather than day schools. The resultant closing of Whirlwind Mission also marked the end of Episcopal ministry to the Cheyenne and Oakerhater's retirement. He then moved to Watonga where he continued to preach in his home and similar locations until his death in 1931.

As he had from the beginning of his ministry, he continued to win a few converts even under these conditions. His remarkable story and example were largely forgotten for more than thirty years. Then an Episcopal family moved to Watonga and attempted to establish a congregation there. They contacted a priest from Woodward who agreed to assist them and placed an announcement in the Watonga paper inviting interested parties to attend a meeting. All were surprised when over thirty Cheyenne attended, the remnant of those who had been ministered to by Oakerhater and the lay ministers he had trained. This event triggered a new Indian work by state Episcopalians and the effort that led to recognition of his sainthood.

The unusual features of the annual celebration marking his recognition by the church express the uniqueness of the man and his story. The admixture of Indian and Episcopal symbols is a most appropriate reflection of a man who so successfully combined the virtues of two different ways of life. His recognition rightly honors his faithfulness as the measure of his accomplishments. The continuing celebration of his example by his people and his church is the best measure of his significance. ■