

## The Indian Funeral

By TE Patricia Clark with CRE Debbie Battise- Kleinman

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Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay Ahhhh-ayyyy-ah-yay-ha-yah-hay... The sounds of the chants and the powerful drum beats reverberated through my head this afternoon as we left the deep piney woods of East Texas. Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay. Over and over and over again they sounded as we passed the curio stores, the house trailers, the tall trees, and the giant billboards that signal one's nearness to the Alabama Coushatta Indian Reservation near Livingston.

Beloved Chief Oscala had passed on Thursday, and Native Americans from nations all over the southwest had come to pay their final respect. My husband Forrest and I were there to represent the Presbytery of New Covenant. Presbyterians are not usually known for their evangelism, but for some reason known only to the history books, every Alabama Coushatta chief from this tribe in Texas has been a member of the Indian Presbyterian Church on the reservation. I have a fondness for them. What was left of my library after retirement now decorates the walls of the adult education room. When Chief Oscala died, it seemed only fitting that I should be the one to represent the Presbytery.

Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay. Ahhhh-ayyyy-ah-yay-ha-yah-hay. The male veterans who have served in the United States armed services are warming up inside the Indian Reservation's huge gymnasium for the Veterans' Flag Song. Chief Oscala was a proud veteran, having served in the Army during the Korean War as a corporal.

Forrest and I arrive just as the flag draped casket is unloaded from the hearse. Eight pall bearers accompany the chief's body into the cavernous room. Large flags are all over the walls. Outside the U.S. flag is flying at half mast. They open the casket for viewing, and a long line of people quickly forms, snaking through the back of the gym and into the hallways so that people may pay their respects. Overwhelmingly they are Native American, and many have chosen traditional dress to wear to this ceremony.

At the foot of the coffin stands a pony tailed Indian at attention holding the chief's staff of feathers with a dream catcher, and emblems of all the armed services. Forrest and I pay our respects and sit down on one of the folding chairs that have been set up for the occasion. We wait, and then the veterans who are gathered in a circle up front begin to drum and chant: Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay. Ahhhh-ayyyy-ah-yay-ha-yah hay.

Slowly the solemn procession begins amidst the loud drumming and chanting: The Indian carrying the chief's staff leads the way down the makeshift center aisle. He is followed by a color guard with flags from all the armed services, the casket, the ministers, the chief's grieving widow, his ninety-year-old sister, and then his family. Native American families are large on the reservation. Chief Oscala was one of ten siblings.

Finally everyone has taken their seat. There are probably close to a thousand of us jammed inside that gym, many sitting on bleachers that line the walls. A gentle Presbyterian lay

pastor, herself the daughter of an Indian chief, welcomes the crowd and prays. We are all invited to sing the chief's favorite hymn that has been handwritten, xeroxed and passed to the crowd along with three more of his favorite hymns. The words are English and sound nothing like Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay. We struggle to sing the simple tune led by a small choir of his nieces accompanied by his grandson on the digital piano:

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While the world looks upon me as I struggle along  
They say I have nothing, but they are so wrong.  
In my heart I'm rejoicing, how I wish they could see.  
Thank you Lord, for your blessings on me.

There's a roof up above me, I've a great place to sleep.  
There is food on my table and shoes on my feet.  
You gave me your love Lord and a fine family.  
Thank you Lord, for your blessings on me.

I know I'm not wealthy and these clothes are not new.  
I don't have much money, but Lord I have you.  
And to me you're all that matters though the world may not see.  
Thank you Lord, for your blessings on me.

Indeed Chief Oscala led a simple life. People on the reservation do not have much in the way of material goods. It's hard to miss the massive USDA Food Distribution Center that sits across from the gymnasium on the reservation.

Four speakers give eulogies, all but one of them members of the Alabama Coushatta tribe. Chief Oscala is remembered as a kind man who always did good to others and whom was known to everyone by a simple nickname, "Smiley." He is praised for his love of sports and youth, a Christian man with a soft heart who thrived on helping others. His lifelong Anglo friend John Davis praises the chief's family for their care of him: "They seen that Smiley did not want for anything."

More than two hours after the ceremony began, the drummers once again begin their flag song: Hey-yeh-ha-yah-ay-ya-hay. Ahhhh-ayyy-ah-yay-ha-yah hay. Slowly the procession moves out of the gym, into waiting cars, and the road that leads to the ancient cemetery. Others walk through the tall pine laden trees. A gentle rain has been falling all morning.

The lay pastor tells me: "The Indians say that when it rains after a loved one dies and before the person is buried, that person was a good man or woman. Chief Oscala was a good man."