Adaptation: Removal Tribes
Cultural Complex: Historic Chickasaw
Time Range: AD. 1837-present

Geographical Distribution: During the period that Oklahoma was Indian Territory, the Chickasaw occupied an area west of the Choctaws extending from what is now western Bryan County to Jefferson County and north to the South Canadian River. Most of their settlements could be found in an area between western Bryan County and the Blue River in Johnson and Pontotoc Counties.

Background: Removal of the Chickasaw tribe to Oklahoma (Indian Territory) began in 1837. The Chickasaws initially occupied an area in northern Mississippi and western Tennessee, north of the Choctaws, west of the Cherokees and northwest of the Creeks. In the early history of that region, they had considerable impact on the dynamics of European trade and settlement due to their aggressive defense of their territory. Various factions within the tribe supported the English, French, Spanish and Americans. Like most other southeastern tribes, they were caught in the middle of intrigues by Europeans and suffered from conflicts within the tribe from members supporting different European countries. They also engaged in conflicts with other tribes as a consequence of their alignment with the English and Americans on some occasions and with the Spanish in other situations. Despite these problems, the Chickasaw were able to avoid the social and economic deterioration that afflicted many tribes at this time. However, by the early 1800s, the Chickasaw were coming under increased pressure from the United States to move west across the Mississippi so that whites could settle their lands. In 1832, the Chickasaws relented and signed the Franklin Treaty for the cession of the Chickasaw homeland. However, it was not until 1837 that the Chickasaw were actually removed to Indian Territory. The Chickasaw Trail of Tears, although not as devastating as that of the Cherokees, brought severe hardship to the tribe and left many tribal members dependent on the American removal agents and neighboring Choctaws for assistance. They also suffered from European diseases such as smallpox, contracted at temporary relocation centers. Once the U.S. government provided military protection, the Chickasaws expanded westward into the area allocated by treaty. Their settlements became more fully established and prosperous. Despite being on the losing side in the Civil War and later the reduction of tribal lands into individual allotments, the Chickasaws remained a dominant economic and political base for south-central Oklahoma.

Environment: Environmental conditions in Indian Territory/Oklahoma during the period of the 1830s to 1900s were basically those of today. While years of drought and exceptional moisture probably occurred, the weather was similar to modern variable conditions. However, the Chickasaws did enter a region largely untouched by European society. Most of south-central Oklahoma was virgin land with small herds of bison, black bears, cougars, and other animals seldom seen today. The vegetation included a greater abundance of woodlands because farming had not yet cleared large tracts of land. This changed somewhat as Choctaw and Chickasaw plantation owners began operations in the major river valleys.
**Demography:** Approximately 6,000 to 7,000 Chickasaws were removed to Oklahoma in the late 1830s. There were also roughly 1200 slaves removed along with tribal members. However, these people were scattered over an extremely large area, resulting in a low population density. Chickasaw towns were comparable to smaller white settlements of about 200-500 people. Most Chickasaws, however, lived in rural areas. During earlier periods, the Chickasaw population was essentially pure-blood Indian. However, increasing encroachment by whites eventually led to intermarriage and an increased number of mixed-bloods.

**Technology:** The technology of the Chickasaws was an interesting blend of aboriginal materials and European goods. They had been trading with European and Euroamericans for roughly 200 years prior to removal and many tribal members had a lifestyle similar to rural whites as a result of accommodating European technology into their lifestyle.

The aboriginal technology included some use of chipped stone tools such as arrowpoints, scrapers, and knives. They also maintained use of traditional ceramic technology. In many cases, the Chickasaw manufactured their own pottery in European styles. Thus, teapots, cups, saucers and bowls are found that resemble European wares, but which were made from native clays and manufactured by the coil method. In addition, the Chickasaws had sizable amounts of white ceramics such as shelledge, transfer prints and hand-painted wares. They also had sizable collections of Euroamerican pipes made at a number of different factories. Metal goods included basic kitchen items such as pots, pans, kettles, eating utensils, knives, guns, axes, etc. In some cases Euroamerican metal goods were accommodated into the aboriginal technological system. For example, kettles were sometimes cut up in order to make metal arrowpoints. The Chickasaws also had sizable collections of silver ornaments such as brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Most of their agricultural tools were also metal. These included plows, harrows, axes, hoes, shovels, etc. The Chickasaws did however continue to use wood for tools and utensils ranging from bowls to mortars and pestles. Their clothing was typically that worn by whites although men continued to wear some deerskin leggings and shirts.

**Settlement:** As noted in the section on demography, the Chickasaws maintained essentially a settlement system of settled towns and rural homesteads. A few plantations were established along the Red River. Established towns and villages such as Tishomingo contained the range of services typically found in smaller regional centers (e.g. post office, blacksmith shop, doctor, barber, store, council house, etc.). These settlements were connected by a series of roads with each other and with the military posts that had been established in the region (Fort Arbuckle and Fort Washita). Many of the mixed-bloods who had developed commercial enterprises prior to removal to Indian Territory formed the nucleus of these towns. Many Chickasaws established isolated rural homesteads/farmsteads. Conditions were much like those prior to removal. The family lived in a split log cabin with numerous outbuildings. The family typically consisted of 5-7 members. Only enough land for marginal levels of farming was cleared. The average plots might range from 40 to 60 acres. For those with political status, acreages were higher. In the Red River Valley, some Chickasaws established large plantation holdings growing cotton and other crops, which were attended to by slaves. These plantations were
analogous to those in the south at the time of the Civil War. This settlement pattern remained in existence until the Dawes Act resulted in the allotment of lands to individual tribal members, thus creating a homogenous pattern of land holdings. Other changes did not occur until after statehood.

**Subsistence:** The basic diet of townspeople was beef, pork and other staples (corn, wheat, etc.) obtained from the local mercantiles. Rural people maintained a meat diet of beef and pork supplemented by wild game. Plant foods were corn, wheat, beans and a variety of vegetables grown in small family plots. Cattle were used more frequently than hogs in the diet. This was because hogs did not do well in the Cross Timbers habitat. However, deer and small game were also available in abundance and provided a more than adequate dietary supplement.

**Social/Political System:** Chickasaw society was focused around the clan system. Historically, from seven to fifteen clans (all established from an animal totem) were divided into moieties (two social groupings). Within the clans, a matrilineal (tracing ancestry through the mother’s line) structure was followed. However, the basic social unit of society was the family/household. Because marriage was outside the clan, any marriage established ties between two different clans in the Chickasaw. The wife was responsible to the mother, sisters and brothers of her husband and in fact could not remarry or divorce her spouse without their approval. The clan system was also heavily involved with the mythological origins and ceremony of the tribe. Each clan represented an animal totem related to the creation of the Chickasaws. The clans were also instrumental in renewal dances and other ceremonies.

The political structure of the Chickasaws was an extension of the clan system. Each clan (or town) was self-governed by a council of elders and a chief (Minko). The ranking chief from the highest clan in the Imosaktca moiety was the High Minko of the tribe. To assist in tribal government, there was also a national council comprised of clan chiefs and esteemed elders who helped in decision-making. In the early historic period, the majority of the leaders and the High Minko were purebloods. Over time, though, mixed-bloods gained a greater role in tribal politics.

Religious ceremonies of the Chickasaw were similar to those of other southeastern tribes. Ceremonies and dances were tied to seasonal events such as the green corn. Thus dances, dance grounds and music cannot be divorced from the ceremonies that generated them.