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Benjamin Wilburn Hampton: Choctaw Code Talker and Soldier

Conditions and Situations of Benjamin Hampton's Time

I was raised on a tract of land which was allotted to members of the Choctaw tribe in the late 19th century. My great-great-great grandparents—and Benjamin Hampton's parents—Joseph and Ellen Hampton, were the first of my Choctaw ancestors to live in Indian Territory, which is now Oklahoma. Joseph and Ellen were full blood Choctaws who, along with many other members of their tribe, were native to Mississippi, but unlike most of their relatives, Joseph and Ellen moved to Indian Territory before the Indian Removal Act (which was signed by President Andrew Jackson) was enacted. Indian Removal eventually forced most of Mississippi's Choctaws out of their ancestral lands, though small groups which managed to evade removal established a Mississippi Choctaw community which still exists. Joseph and Ellen foresaw where relations between the Mississippi Choctaws and the United States Federal government was headed and decided to voluntarily settle Indian Territory then, rather than be forced out later by the United States Federal government. My uncle often jokingly states that our family's proclivity for predicting the outcomes of elections, the endings of movies, and the winners of competitions is a remnant of the foresight exercised by our ancestors, Joseph and Ellen Hampton (Hampton-McWilliams Personal Interview).

Joseph and Ellen Hampton were able to make a decent living in Indian Territory, which allowed them to raise a large family, however, only two of their sons, Alexander and Benjamin,

are of particular interest and importance to this narrative. Alexander was the grandfather of my grandmother, and Benjamin was his younger brother. Both Alexander and Benjamin owned neighboring allotments on which members of my family have lived. I currently live on a section of my great-great-grandfather Alexander's allotment (along with Benjamin's great-grandson Vance and his family), while non-family members own Benjamin's allotment. Fortunately, the current owner of what was once Benjamin's property allows my family to fish in the pond which appears in the video to the left, so we are able to experience some sentimentality from fishing



and walking on land which Benjamin and Alexander once did (Hampton-McWilliams Personal Interview; McWilliams, Trevor YouTube).

Benjamin's Connection to Alexander Hampton

McWilliams, Trevor/Trevis McWillis. "Ben's Land and Pond." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, March 2, 2018. Web. March 2, 2018.

Although I am directly descended from Alexander Hampton, the remainder of this paper will focus on Benjamin Hampton (roll number 10617), as he served the United States

of America as a Choctaw Code Talker during World War I, one of our nation's first Native soldiers to serve in that capacity. However, Alexander was still an important figure in Benjamin's life for a couple of reasons. The first reason is that Alexander was the eldest of Joseph and Ellen's children, so he held a special position in the family and would have served as a sort of role model and/or foil for Benjamin. Benjamin's sense of duty would have been partially influenced by Alexander, but the two brothers did not necessarily agree about where their senses of duty deserved to be placed. Whereas Alexander felt only a sense of duty to protect and honor his family, Benjamin also felt a sense duty to protect his native land, his friends, and

even strangers, regardless of whether or not some of those people had been dishonorable. The second (and perhaps more intriguing) reason is that the two brothers married the same woman, Emma Jones, though not at the same time. Benjamin and Alexander were both married to different women before America entered World War I—Benjamin was married to one Annie Mae, while Alexander was married to one Emma Jones—but only Benjamin enlisted. Alexander died before Benjamin returned from his military service, so when Benjamin returned from duty he divorced Annie Mae and married Emma. This was at least in part because it was considered a man's duty to care for his dead brother's widow, but Benjamin's divorce from Annie Mae also had to do with Annie's affair with another man, and her resulting pregnancy (Hampton-McWilliams Personal Interview).

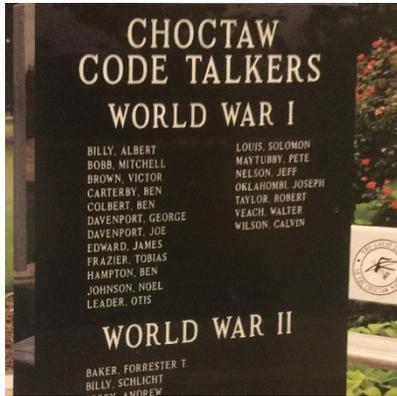
Benjamin Hampton's Military Service

When Benjamin joined the military (as a member of the 142nd Infantry, Company E), after America's official entrance into World War I, the Federal government had issued a mandatory draft of all healthy male citizens eighteen years of age and older, but this did not include Benjamin or any other Native American, which is why Alexander never joined the military. At the time, Native Americans were not legally recognized as citizens, and many still considered Native Americans less than human—even though the Choctaw Nation and other “civilized tribes” had assimilated with their white American neighbors to such an extent that the only obvious distinguishing characteristic between the two groups of people was physical appearance. Oklahoma Choctaws like Ben Hampton dressed and talked like the surrounding whites and often intermarried with them—they made their best efforts to assimilate in the interest of peace—yet many still considered Native Americans less than human and continued to force

them onto progressively smaller areas of land. I mention this not in an effort to victimize Native Americans, but rather to emphasize the significance of Benjamin's Hampton's choice to serve America during World War I. Not only was he not legally obligated to serve, he was also hated by several of the people he defended, simply because he looked different from them. Even though protecting their ancestral lands (whether or not they were allowed to live in them) was likely a factor, it is still remarkable that Ben and the other Choctaw soldiers of the time did not stay safe on their allotments and let white people kill other white people in Europe. They could have easily recused themselves, and I imagine few would condemn them.

Misconceptions and Origins of Choctaws and Code Talking

Most Americans, at some point or another, have heard of the Navajo code talkers, and perhaps the Comanche code talkers as well. The word "Navajo", in particular, has almost become synonymous with the phrase "code talker" for a many Americans. This is partly due to the numerous movies, documentaries, and articles featuring them—which in turn have led to heavy reference to Navajo code talkers in popular television (which essentially cemented typical American attitudes and perceptions of Native American code talkers in general). While it is wonderful that the Navajo have become so well known for their service, and should be honored for it, many misconceptions have come from their renown. One popular belief is that the Navajo were the first Native American code talkers, but they were not even the first code talkers of World War II (Oneida, Chippewa, and Comanche came before them in 1940), much less the first Native American code talkers to serve in any United States war. While the Navajo code talkers were, and still are, historically and culturally significant, it is important to know that there were other men of various other tribes who came before them which served as code talkers, and that



McWilliams, Trevor.
“Choctaw Code Talker
Memorial.” 2018. JPEG.

the success of these other men from other tribes was what led to the Navajo being utilized as code talkers.

In his paper, “Honoring Native American Code Talkers: The Road to the Code Talkers Recognition Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-420),” Dr. William C. Meadows discusses the history

of Native American code talking in general, as well as the specific history of the Choctaw Code Talkers, saying: “Native

American code talking began during World War I with the

Oklahoma Choctaw in Company E of the 142nd Infantry Regiment and in the 143rd Infantry Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division” (Meadows). Company E of the 142nd Regiment was Benjamin Hampton’s unit, which made him one of the first Choctaw code talkers, and one of the first Native American code talkers period. Meadows continues, explaining how the idea to use Choctaw soldiers as code talkers was a response to the need for a way to combat the efforts of the Germans who had been intercepting American telephone line communications and had been shooting or capturing at least one out of every four message runners. American officers believed stationing some of their Choctaw soldiers at the phones in various companies, and having them send and receive messages would solve their problems because, as Meadows says, “... Native American languages were not based on European languages or mathematical progressions...” (Meadows 4). Benjamin Hampton, was a normal soldier, but after some officers heard Ben and other Choctaw soldiers speaking their native tongue, Benjamin and many other Choctaw soldiers were given new orders to man telephones at key communication stations.

Also in his paper, Meadows discusses two kinds of code talking, the first type being the use of coded systems within a Native American language, and the second type being the use of

regular speech within a Native American language. While both types, and the soldiers who used them, were vital to the war effort, the first type is what made the Navajo famous, and required more training than type two. Ben Hampton was trained to utilize both types of code talking to more effectively disguise sensitive communications.

Conclusion

After returning to his allotment when World War I ended, he married Emma Jones, his dead brother's widow. Together, they raised a few children, who later moved away from their family property to pursue various careers. Ben's great-great-grandson, however, learned about



*N.d. McWilliams, Trevor.
"Ben Hampton." 2018.
JPEG.*

his ancestor Ben and decided to move as close to Ben's property as possible, so he now lives on a neighboring property which was once part of Alexander's allotment. Ben's wife died long before him, so when he no longer felt self-sufficient he moved to Arkansas to live with one of his sisters. This is part of why his allotment is no longer owned by the Hampton family. I hope to

buy back his land someday. Benjamin Wilburn Hampton (pictured below) was born on May 31 (or May 30 depending in who is asked), 1892 in Bennington, Blue County, Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory (now Bennington, Oklahoma), and died on April 15, 1963 in Durant, Oklahoma.

Works Cited

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