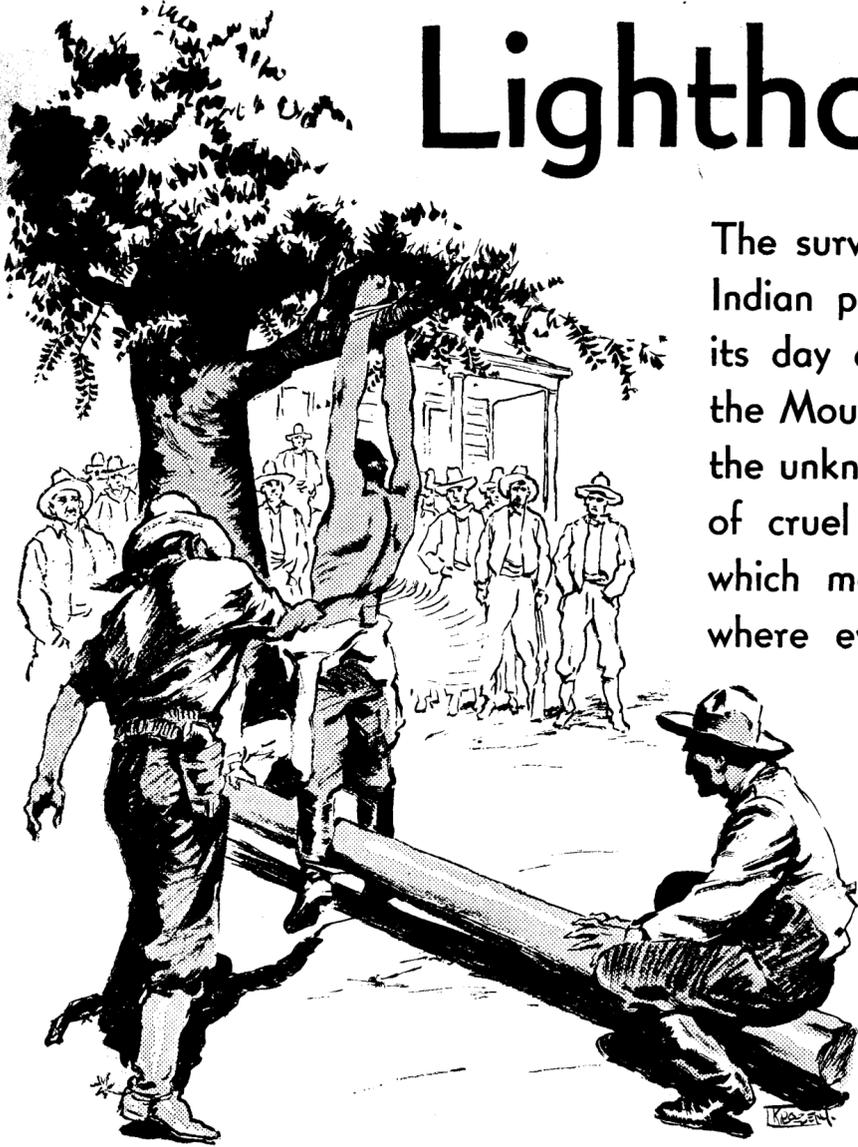


Last of the Seminole Lighthorsemen

The survivors of a now disbanded Indian police force as famous in its day as the Texas Rangers or the Mounties of Canada here tell the unknown story of their system of cruel tortures and executions which maintained law and order where every other system failed



By CLAUDE L. DOUGLAS

On a morning in the summer of 1896 a young Indian spurred a lithe, flea-bitten mare over the rolling hills of the Indian Territory toward Wewoka, capital and principal trading post of the Seminole Nation.

He set a dangerous pace over the rocky terrain, and although he could feel the little animal's heart pounding against the lean ribs under the saddle leather, he dug boot heels into the mare's thin flanks.

In the capital of the Seminoles the rider had an appointment to keep; he had given his word to arrive at a set hour, and he must not fail the rendezvous. It was a matter of grave importance—a matter of life and death—and the young man had tarried over-long at home.

He glanced at the sun, already high in the heavens. He must ride hard . . . faster . . . faster . . .

His cowhide whip rose and fell on foam-flecked withers, and the mare strained forward like a frightened jack rabbit.

IN the capital of the Seminoles, which boasted at that time only a trading post and the council house where the tribal elders met to make the law, stood a scraggly oak tree which grew apart from its neighbors like one shunned as an evil thing. And in a cleared space before it a small band of Indians had gathered, some of them carrying Winchester rifles—while against the trunk of the oak itself stood a younger man, erect and rigid as a statue in bronze.

Around his face was swathed a white bandage . . . and over his left breast was pinned a white paper heart.

An ominous silence hung over the assemblage, to be broken presently by a flurry of words in the Seminole tongue. Five of the waiting tribesmen stepped forward, their rifles at the ready. Silence again . . . a stillness broken only by the rustle of the wind in the trees and the shrill scolding of a blue-jay. The chief raised his arm . . . for a moment it poised aloft, then fell. Five spurts of flame leaped out—five shots reverberated as one.

The young man with the bandaged face sank down beneath the oak, and slowly a bright red stain spread across the whiteness of the paper heart.

Twenty yards away a sweat-caked little mare raised her head and whinnied. Then, still unsaddled, she strolled away to the shade of a nearby grove, for the day was hot . . . the sun sloping into the west . . .

The little mare whinnied again, and looked back. Perhaps she guessed that her master had been in time for his rendezvous—an appointment with Death!

GREASY derricks now dot the Seminole hills; concrete highways follow the trails the Seminoles rode to the tribal pow-wow; and the law of the white man has come to rule over the land once known as the Indian Territory, but down at Wewoka, Oklahoma, may still be found reminders of the day when the red man enforced the law with bullet and whip in that portion of the Territory which comprised the Seminole Nation.

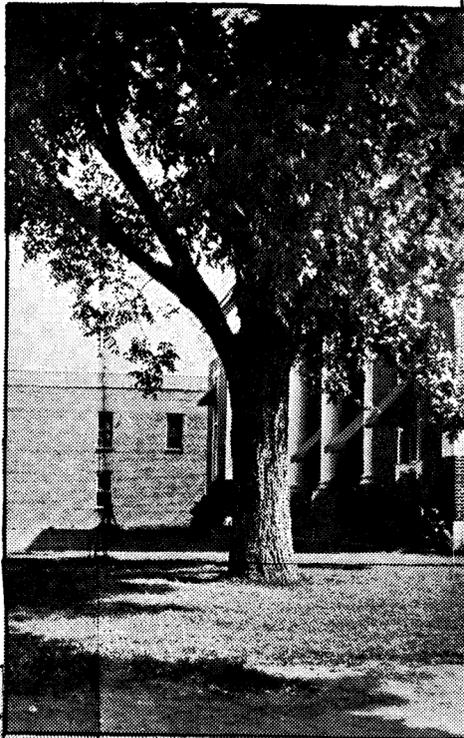
The old whipping tree; it still stands. And, although the execution oak has been cut down and placed in the state historical museum at Oklahoma City, a few of those who dispensed justice beneath its boughs are still alive. The Lighthorsemen of the Seminoles! The "Royal Mounted Police" of the Territory!

They dispensed a grim, but highly efficient brand of corporal justice, a system of law and order . . . and honor . . . that finds no parallel.

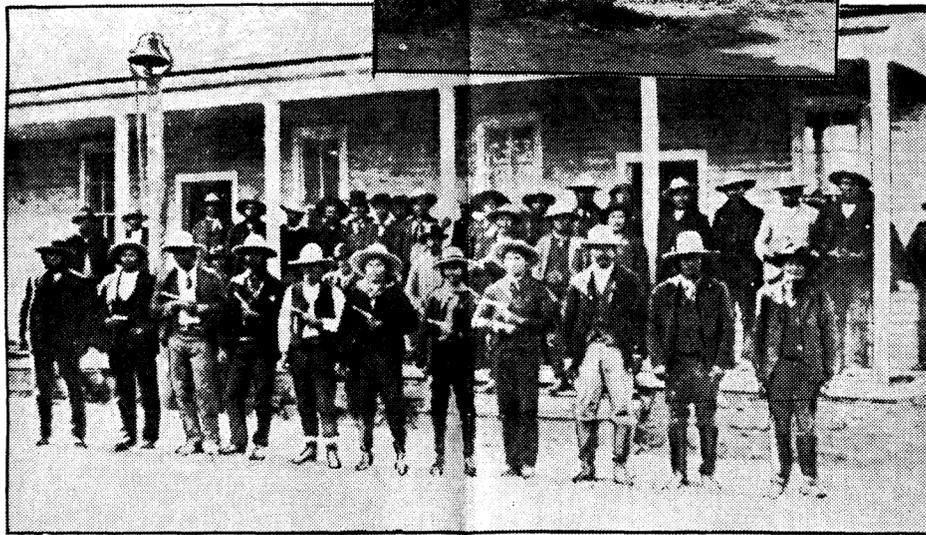
The men who pulled the Winchester triggers that morning in '96 were members of the Lighthorsemen, that band of picked Indians who kept the peace of the frontier in a manner which puts to shame the loop-holed legal structure which makes up the law of this more "civilized" day.

In 1896 the land between Kansas and Texas was considered quite beyond the pale. The Seminoles had no jails,

"The hickory fell . . . and a livid streak painted itself across the unfortunate man's back. . . . The body twitched slightly, but no sound came from it. . . . Fifty lashes, a hundred!"



Under this pecan tree in Wewoka, Okla., thieves and other law-breakers were whipped. . . . The lower branches, to which convicted men were strung, have been cut away in recent years.



Lawmakers and law enforcers. . . . This photo, taken in 1904, shows the 11 men (foreground) who were the "Royal Northwest Mounted Police" of the Seminole nation. . . . They preserved order with a ruthless but effective finality.

the Nation had no statute books, and the Territory had few lawyers. The tribal laws were brief and well known to all.

"We didn't need jails," says Chili Fish, present principal chief and former Lighthorse captain, "because we had so few prisoners."

The answer may be found in the unwritten traditions of the tribe.

The young man who rode so doggedly to his rendezvous with death that day in '96 was a convicted murderer, doomed to die by the tribal council because he had broken a law old as the tablets of Moses. He rode that morning, not from death, but to it. He knew the old oak back of the trading post. . . . But he had been caught by the Lighthorsemen, tried, convicted . . . and there was no higher court of appeal. The council had spoken.

Yet there had been one chance of escape, only one. He had not chosen to take it. A fortnight before, after his trial, a captain of Lighthorsemen had said to him:

"You have been sentenced to die, but now you may go free. You are to go home and put your affairs in order . . . but two weeks from today you must return here . . . to die. Do you promise?"

"I will be here," agreed the condemned. He rode away. And on the appointed day he returned. He had lingered over-long at home, but by hard riding he reached the post oak at the hour set.

Why hadn't he run away during those two weeks of grace when escape would have been easy? He couldn't . . . because he had given his word. He couldn't . . . because other men before him had been given the same opportunity and they had all returned. The young man could break

the law, but not his word . . . and the tribal tradition.

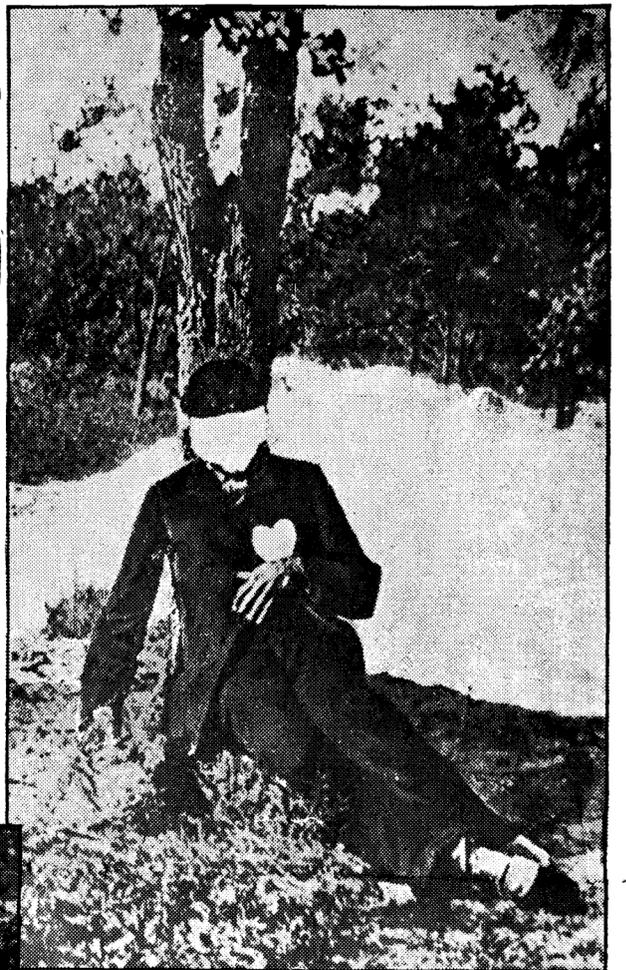
"Condemned men always come back," says Chili Fish. "In all the history of the Lighthorsemen there was never a failure. Their word was the only bond . . . people didn't make bail then, like today."

LITTLE is known of the origin of the Lighthorsemen, but those of the Oklahoma clan of the Seminoles say that that method of law enforcement was the custom of their ancestors for countless moons before the United States government, in the years between 1830 and 1842, kicked the protesting tribesmen out of the Florida Everglades and sent them over the bitter "trail of tears" to the Indian Territory.

So the Seminoles brought with them when they migrated west the idea of the Lighthorsemen, and it was not long after the transplanted tribe settled itself in the Territory that he organization was reborn.

The Lighthorsemen were the pick of the tribe, selected by the council for fearlessness and honesty. Their job was to track down the criminal and bring him to the building in Wewoka where the council met, listened to the case before a prosecutor and a representative for the defense, and then passed judgment.

If found guilty the defendant either was shot beneath the oak or was tied to the whipping tree and given a designated number of lashes with a stout hickory switch wielded by a Lighthorseman . . . for the Seminoles knew but two degrees of punishment, death by the bullet and the scourging near-death of the hickory. The degree of punishment depended upon the crime.



"Five shots reverberated as one . . . the young man with the bandaged face sank down beside the oak." . . . This startling photo, probably the only one in existence, shows an actual Seminole execution . . . the last under the tribal laws.

IT was the murderers who were led to the post oak back of the trading post . . . the pecan whipping tree was the particular Hell set aside for those who "borrowed" a neighbor's hog or cut the throat of a brother's beef.

If the majestic pecan tree which stands today on the lawn of the Seminole county courthouse at Wewoka had the power of speech it could tell tales that would make one think twice before setting out to purloin a neighbor's calf.

It would not be a pleasant story, for it is not a pleasant sight to see a strong man stripped to the waist and suspended taut from a tree limb to have his back-slashed to ribbons with a stinging, welt-raising lash. Fifty blows for the first offense, 100 for the second, and 150 for the third—this was the manner in which the Seminoles dealt with thieves. And 50 might have been quite enough for the man of the law was strong indeed, and whipped men scarcely ever remembered after the count of 50, nor cared.

On the whipping tree in those days there grew a lower branch which was close enough to the ground to permit a man of average height to stand upon the flat of his feet and touch the bark above with the palms of his hands. The wrists were lashed over the limb and the toe-tips touched earth, but the Lighthorsemen tied the victim's feet and then placed a heavy rail between them—with a man sitting on either end.

Now all was in readiness for the administering of justice. A Lighthorseman delegated by the captain stepped forward and selected a switch. He gripped the thumb-thick hickory, tested its "whip," squared his stance.

Swish! The hickory fell, and a livid streak painted itself across the unfortunate man's back. The body strung to the tree twitched slightly but no sound came from it. Swish . . . whack! Swish . . . whack! Fifty lashes . . . a hundred. The crimson streaks were gone now, hidden under the blood that covered them. And still no murmur from the victim. His eyes were closed and his body had lost something of its tenseness. What matter 50 more lashes . . . now? The whip fell again and again, on raw flesh!

At length they cut him down, a bloody and almost lifeless form, and Dr. Charles Lynn, official physician, came forward to apply the much-needed arnica and bandages. They didn't die, but they did go down into deep valleys of death and, thanks to Dr. Lynn, climb slowly out again.

WAS the Seminole law a just law? Chief Chili Fish thinks it was, because if a man thieved thrice and then sinned again he was given another chance to mend his ways.

"We started all over again," says Chili Fish, explaining that 50 lashes were applied for the fourth offense . . . the mercy of the Seminoles!

There were no whippings after 1900, when the law of the white man came to the Nation in the person of Judge H. M. Tate, U. S. commissioner.

The whipping tree still stands, but its lower limb has been cut away . . . gone, like the law it helped to uphold.

Gone, too, are most of the Lighthorsemen . . . Captain Lonnie . . . Dennis Cyrus . . . and kindred spirits. Only a few remain . . . Chili Fish . . . and Unisi, he who followed the "trail of tears" from Florida, but the years have taken away his sight.

They are a reticent people, these Seminoles, and they have kept no written records. Names have been forgotten, and dates, but one may still hear tales. . . .

"Only one man among those sentenced to die ever hesitated to come back to Wewoka at the end of his two weeks, and he was a young man, scarcely more than a boy. He had gone home to spend his last days, but two weeks pass rapidly when one is young, and on the day before the execution his boldness vanished. That night he talked long with his father and what passed between them was never told.

But at noon of the next day a creaky wagon drawn by a pair of mangy nags stopped before the door of the council house. An old man climbed down.

"I have brought my son," he told the Lighthorse captain. Later, near sunset, the old wagon rattled back over the homeward road. The old man drove slowly and behind him, in the wagon bed, rode the son he loved so well—silent under the covering of his blanket. . . .

Search where you will among the Seminoles and you will find no Lighthorseman who ever swung the whip or pulled the trigger. They smile and shake their heads. Yes . . . they have watched others do it, but not themselves.

But they will tell you that their justice was infinitely more just, more efficient, and more to be respected than the law of today.