Full Of Choctaws--
A One-Room Schoolhouse

By Robert L. Hardee
Staff Photos

Some may think the one-teacher school went out with the horse and buggy, but that isn't necessarily so.

It's true that, in most cases, the pot-bellied stove and crude wooden benches have vanished. But the Choctaw Indian elementary school on Bogue Homa reservation, three miles east of Sandersville, Miss., is living proof that the one-man seat of learning can be functional and vibrant—even in the space age. What's more, Principal Emerick B. Boyt is determined to keep it that way.

He has a good place to work and live: The white frame schoolhouse sits on the crest of a gently sloping hill, against a backdrop of green pines. Far from being penetrated by frigid winds or humid warmth, the building is heated with gas in winter; air conditioners cool the place on sultry days in September and May. The teacher's home, located on the campus, is modern in every way.

Too, the 34'x17' classroom is equipped with record player, headphones, tape recorder and three types of projectors for movies, filmstrips and individual pictures. There is also a kitchen lunchroom (supervised by Miss Dora Henry), a storage room, a combined office-clinic and a bathroom with shower stalls.

But in spite of its audio-visual aids and other physical assets, the Bogue Homa school wouldn't be much to write about without the 24 eager youngsters in grades one through five.

First thing each morning, a small school bus—with Boyt himself at the wheel—rolls on a seven-mile circuit across hilly woodland terrain to pick up the students. They are at school—busily working—by 8 a.m., have a lunch and play period from 11:30 to 12:30, and are dismissed at 3 p.m.

How does Boyt manage five grades? His usual procedure is to have most students concentrate on the same subject at the same time. For example, he may have one or two groups working arithmetic at the blackboard, while others are studying their problems at their desks. The beginners, not ready for the complications of mathematics, may be listening to a simple recorded story on headphones.

Boyt gets some classroom help in one phase of his work. Dora Henry, fluent in her native Choctaw tongue, goes beyond her assignment as planner of meals and cook to teach English as a second language. A graduate of Haskell Institute in Kansas, she uses materials and methods devised and developed at Columbia University.

Until the children become more familiar with the new language, they translate a question from the teacher into Choctaw and then proceed in their thinking back to English. This awkward course might lead an inexperienced instructor to conclude that they are slow. Not so. "Give them time," says Boyt, "and they'll come up with the answer."

Miss Henry agrees. "When you come back to English," she explains, "you have to think about what you are going to say to put it across." She knows; such was her own experience.

Another difficulty in reconciling the two languages, Principal Boyt points out, is that the Choctaw sentence pattern is just the reverse of the English. For example, the Indian boy would say: "To town I go." Also, there is only one verb form in the Choctaw tongue. For instance, the word for "go" (iya) also has to take care of "went" and "gone."

To make things still more confusing, the adjective follows the noun, as in Bogue Homa (Creek Red).

The children wrestle bravely with English and take the other subjects in stride, but their first love is art. Give them crayons or paints and they'll lose themselves in a dreamworld of fanciful objects. In fact, a student sometimes gets caught transferring his imagery to paper when he should be studying his spelling.

Boyt has stimulated extra interest in pictures by organizing a camera club among the boys and girls. To add zest to the project, he set up a darkroom so they could process the film and print their pictures.

Having a group that offers no discipline problems is just a daydream for many teachers. It has come true for Boyt. He has found Choctaw youngsters to be attentive, appreciative, responsive and—most gratifying of all— orderly in the classroom.

Furthermore, Boyt is never troubled with crybabies during the first days of the session. His bus driving takes him to the children's homes; the beginners get to know him before they are enrolled.

Bogue Homa boys and girls are fond of action. They like to whirl and step to the sprightly rhythm of square dancing. Up to this year, their favorite game was baseball. You could see them flinging a ball or swinging a bat even on the coldest day in winter. Then, suddenly they became aware of football. Adopting it as their very own, they play with all the enthusiasm of someone who has arrived late at the table. Fielding two full teams required the girls to join the opposing squads. They did—and they loved it.

Both sexes carry a pretty hefty appetite into the lunchroom. They are most happy, Miss Henry notes, when fried chicken is on the menu. Give them fruit drinks too and, even on a gray day, you can see sunshine in their faces.

After a meal of this kind, Miss Henry has no trouble getting girls to help with the dishes or boys to mop the floor. The important thing, she feels, is to teach them how to work.

Boyt's pupils set an almost incredible four-year attendance average of 98.9 percent. The school seems well on its way to topping that mark this year.

Two factors are responsible. First, Bogue Homa kids like school. They're never absent—unless they are so weakened by a cold or virus that they have to stay in bed. Even then, they know they can depend on their principal for simple remedies like aspirin and cough syrup.

Second, Choctaw children seem to be practically immune to common communicable ailments. Only one case of mumps and two of measles have been recorded at Bogue Homa in five years.

Helpful, too, are preventive shots given before classes begin in the fall by a doctor and nurse from the staff of the U.S. Public Health Service Indian Hospital in Philadelphia, Miss. The doctor and nurse also visit the school for clinical duty on the first Tuesday of each month. The federally operated hospital is available for specialized care exclusively to the Indians of the state.

The children also receive regular dental checkups. In addition, Dr. W. H. Parker of Heidelberg is under contract for general medical service to the children—as well as to all residents of the reservation.

The schooling of the Indians of Mississippi is under supervision of the Choctaw Indian Agency, also at Philadelphia. The area office is in Muskogee.
Charles Noonan shows skill that won him first place in the 1966 state diving competition. Charles credits his parents with having helped, encouraged aquatic career.

Peggy Higgins on her mount, The Jeffersonian Democrat, accepts award from horse show officials.

church. I was selected! Now I'm even writing songs on my own!"

Sometimes, with careful persuasion, a parent can guide a child in exercising undiscovered talent. So it was with Kenneth Faller, son of Mr. and Mrs. Harold E. Faller, 2914 Palmer. Kenny, a senior at Isidore Newman School, recalls, "I was encouraged to take clarinet lessons; my parents purchased a good instrument for me. They made me practice. "They always said that if you are going to do anything, it is worth doing well. As a result, I'm president of the school band. I was also interested in chemistry. They encouraged me again. As a result, I'll soon enter Duke University with a science major in mind. My parents always made me finish anything I started. Now, when I accept projects, I am determined to finish them—and I'm also determined to do well."

Charles Noonan is another young man who profited by parental encouragement and guidance. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. John M. Noonan, 5525 Pitt, started him swimming when he was five years old. They saw he enjoyed the sport and sent him to swimming and diving clinics. At 9, he won his first event. Charlie, a student at De La Salle, says, "They often went to swimming and diving meets with me, and they're the ones to whom I owe my diving career."

And career it is! Charlie has won some outstanding swimming and diving competitions since 1958. In 1965 and 1966, he won state championships.

Sometimes a sport or skill can be right in the family and parents still have to guide their children to get them interested. Peggy Higgins' parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. T. Higgins Jr., 241 Audubon st., show horses. Although Peggy now works these horses for her parents, she says, "There were lots of times when I had to go out of town to a horse show—instead of to a party I preferred."

A junior at St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal School, she says she's profiting by her riding development, loves performing in shows. Peggy shows sincere appreciation of parental interest and encouragement. She says, "there will always be parties, but not the opportunity for important training that can only be done now."

So, Young Adults, next time your parents make a suggestion, or encourage you, perk up and listen! Remember that they were young once (and maybe not so long ago), and they encourage you for your sake . . . not for theirs.

It's easy to disregard our parents' knowledge, experience, and maturity and love. But it's better to recognize that parents know best.

Sally Jane Birdsong, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Frank A. Birdsong Sr. of 5403 McKenna, is a senior at Louise S. McGehee School. Last summer she won a trip to Mexico in a national essay contest for her version of teenager's utopia.
Overall authority is vested in the Office of Indian Affairs of the U.S. Department of the Interior. While there is no educational program at present for adults at Bogue Homa, they too like to "go to school." For them, the building serves as a community center where they can discuss tribal problems—while they munch cookies and sip black coffee.

An Air Force pilot in World War II, Principal Boyt is rounding out his fifth year at Bogue Homa. Previously, he taught two years in Louisiana at schools in Ouachita Parish. He is a graduate of Northeast Louisiana State College in Monroe.

Boyt is married and has a stepson, Randall, 16, and two daughters, Patti, 9, and Shawnda Beth, 2. When he came to Bogue Homa, he may have had some doubts about whether a small school could operate efficiently. Not now. If equipment is adequate and leaders are dedicated, Boyt sees nothing in the way of success of the one-room school.

To bring the point home, Bogue Homa gives a good account of itself in annual speech contests with six other Choctaw elementary schools in Mississippi. The little school took one first and two second places in 1965, and two firsts and one second in 1966. That showing, Bogue Homa folks believe, should settle any argument.

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