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## Too Dark to Be Angels: The Class System among the Cherokees at the Female Seminary

DEVON A. MIHESUAH

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The Cherokee Female Seminary was a nondenominational boarding school established by the Cherokee Nation at Park Hill, Indian Territory, in order to provide high-quality education for the young women of its tribe. The curriculum was based on that of Mount Holyoke Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and it offered no courses focusing on Cherokee culture. The seminary first opened in 1851, but in 1887, it was destroyed by fire. Two years later, a larger, three-story seminary building was erected on the outskirts of the Cherokee Nation's capital, Tahlequah. By 1909, when the building was converted into Northeastern State Normal School by the new state of Oklahoma, approximately 3,000 Cherokee girls had attended the seminary. A male seminary was built at the same time, three miles from the female seminary; it educated Cherokee youth until it burned in 1910.<sup>1</sup>

While the female seminary was indeed a positive influence on many of its pupils, there is much evidence to suggest that the social atmosphere at the seminary contributed to the rift between Cherokee girls from progressive, mixed-blood families and those from more traditional, uneducated backgrounds. Although many of the girls hailed from traditional families, the seminary did nothing to preserve or reinforce Cherokee customs among its students. But retention of ancestral Cherokee values was not the purpose of the school's establishment.

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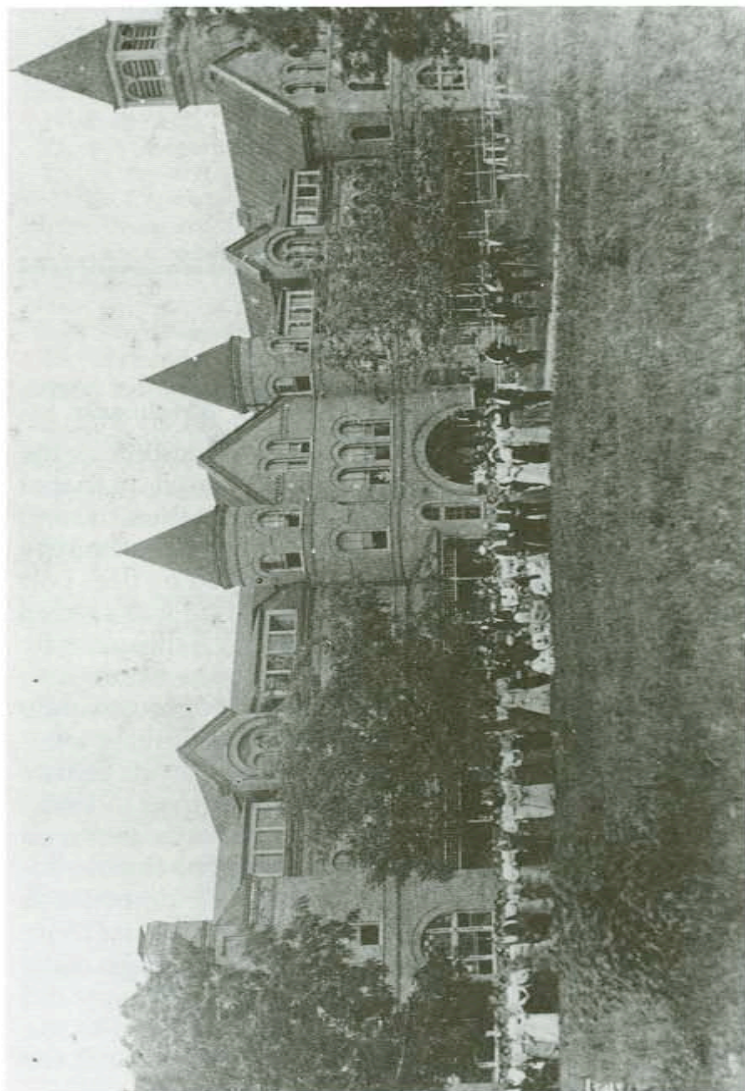


FIGURE 1. The second Cherokee Female Seminary building (circa 1902) was closer to Tahlequah, with a better water supply. It measured  $246' \times 96'$ , with an eastern wing measuring  $70' \times 100'$ , and it cost \$78,000 to build. (All photos in this article courtesy of University Archives, John Vaughan Library, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.)



The Cherokee National Council was controlled by progressive, educated, mixed-blood tribesmen, many of whom subscribed to the value system of the upper-class antebellum South. Their decisions regarding the seminary were supported by most of the mixed-bloods of the tribe—white men and their Cherokee spouses (for the most part mixed-bloods)—and, to a lesser extent, by the progressive full-bloods. The prime interest of these progressive tribal members was indeed education, but also the proper “refinement” of their daughters so that they could serve as knowledgeable, but dutiful, wives in the Cherokee Nation. Another reason for the seminary was the acculturation of the poor, full-blood girls, but apparently this idea did not come about until 1871, after the council was pressured by disgruntled tribesmen to establish a “primary department”<sup>2</sup> to provide education free of charge to poorer full-blood children who could not afford the five-dollar-per-semester tuition. (From 1851 to 1856, tuition was free.)

The social aspects of the seminary are intriguing. Regardless of social, economic, and ancestral backgrounds, all the girls (with the exception of a few white pupils and girls of other tribes) identified themselves as Cherokees. Because of these socioeconomic differences, within the seminary walls a definite class system evolved, creating tension much like that which existed throughout the Cherokee Nation between the mixed-bloods and the full-bloods, between the traditionalists and the progressives, and between those tribal members who were proslavery and those who were not.<sup>3</sup>

During the seminary’s early years (1851–56), there was no tuition fee, but money undoubtedly determined who entered the seminary. In the 1850s, according to the laws of the Cherokee Nation, the only prerequisite for admittance was an acceptable score on the entrance examination (except during the summer sessions, when all students paid) combined, perhaps, with a first-come-first-serve priority. But daughters of politically prominent and affluent families (Adair, Bushyhead, Hicks, McNair, Ross, Thompson, to name a few) were always enrolled.<sup>4</sup> These girls were from acculturated, educated households, had already attended good public schools, and had no difficulty passing the written examination. Most full-bloods who wanted to enroll did not have the educational background that enabled them to pass the test. The

schools they attended in the distant reaches of the Cherokee Nation were not as well equipped as those closer to the capital, Tahlequah, nor were there enough Cherokee-speaking teachers to help them learn English.

In 1856, the seminary closed because of financial difficulties. After it reopened in 1872, the enrollment situation changed somewhat, but money still gave students an advantage. Some students who failed courses semester after semester were repeatedly granted readmittance—as long as they could pay the tuition.<sup>5</sup> Indicative of the lenient standards of English for tuition-payers is an excerpt from a student's letter to her sister in 1889:

I seat myself this evening to right you a few lines to let you know that I am well at the present and hope this to find you the same I was glad to hear from you this evening I haven't got but 2 letters from home and one from you and I have written 6 letters since I have been here and this is the 7 I aint rooming with no body yet here is the picture of the jail house. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Although many students were indeed from affluent families, wealthy students were in the minority.<sup>7</sup> It is true that the majority of the students came from families who could manage to pay the tuition, but they were not necessarily from the monied class. In fact, daughters of the wealthier families were sent to schools outside the Cherokee Nation and never attended the female seminary.<sup>8</sup> And each year, dozens of primaries went to the school free of charge. The class system at the seminary, then, was based on money from 1851 to 1856, but, from 1872 until 1910, was apparently based more on race (Cherokee and white blood quantum), appearance (Indian or Caucasian), and degree of acculturation.

Acculturated students and teachers took tremendous pride in their education and appearance. Mixed-blood students frequently scorned those girls who had less white blood and darker skin. A few progressive full-bloods also belittled those who had limited understanding of white ways. It was the general consensus among the mixed-blood students that the full-blood girls were "a little bit backward,"<sup>9</sup> and that the full-bloods were well aware of their inferior status at the seminary.

Many factors contributed to the feelings of inferiority and alienation experienced by the full-bloods and "unenlightened" mixed-bloods at the school. Since most full-bloods and some poor



mixed-bloods worked for their room and board, they were assigned to the third floor with the primary students. Because they were often behind academically, many were placed in classes with the younger girls. They were left behind on social excursions, because only those in the high school grades were allowed to attend events in Tahlequah and the male seminarians' ball-games. Unlike the pupils whose parents sent them spending money, the poorer students were unable to afford party clothes, nor could they buy after-dinner snacks from the local vendors—also a social occasion.

The attitudes of some of the teachers also led to resentment among many of the full-bloods. The National Council employed many qualified mixed-blood instructors, but there were no traditional Cherokee teachers. Despite the instructors' sympathies for the traditional girls, they rarely understood the problems the full-bloods faced. In 1908, for example, mixed-blood seminary superintendent Albert Sydney Wyly (an 1890 graduate of the male seminary) expressed his impatience with the full-blood girls by referring to the mixed-bloods as "whiter" and therefore "more intellectual." He criticized the full-bloods for their "pathetic attachment to home," and remarked patronizingly that at least they "possess a great deal of artistic ability."<sup>10</sup>

Another example of insensitivity is cited by teacher Dora Wilson Hearon, who in 1895 noted that she and her aunt, principal Ann Florence Wilson, took the third-floor inspection duty, because the other teachers were repelled by the students' head lice.<sup>11</sup> In 1907, prior to the school's first rehearsal of the annual Shakespeare production (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), a mixed-blood senior responded to the administration's concerned query, "Full-blood girls to do Shakespeare? Impossible!" by saying, "You don't know [teachers] Miss Allen and Miss Minta Foreman!" implying that these instructors were indeed miracle workers.<sup>12</sup>

The teachers also relentlessly reinforced the importance of learning and retaining the values of white society. At the same time, they repressed Cherokee values, thereby causing confusion among the more traditional students. One instructor, Kate O'Donald Ringland, later recalled that in regards to seminary philosophy, "anything 'white' was ideal";<sup>13</sup> an alumna remembers learning in the primary grades that the "white way was the only acceptable way."<sup>14</sup> DeWitt Clinton Duncan spoke for his fellow National Council members in a lengthy *Cherokee Advocate* (the



FIGURE 2. The fourteen members of the Cherokee Female Seminary class of 1905.



Cherokee Nation newspaper) diatribe when he asked, "Can the mental wants of an Indian youth be satisfied . . . by resources less fruitful than that which caters to the Anglo-Saxon mind? The Cherokee language, at the present advanced period of their [Cherokees'] civilization, cannot meet the exigencies of our people."<sup>15</sup> With the National Council advocating white education, the traditionalists were continually pressured to adopt a different culture if they wanted to attend the seminary.

But not all seminary full-bloods felt ostracized. At least 165 full-bloods enrolled in the seminary (about 11 percent of the fifteen hundred students whose blood quantum can be ascertained), and they stayed enrolled an average of four semesters, two semesters longer than the mixed-bloods, but five semesters less than the graduates.<sup>16</sup> This was probably because girls of one family attended school together, which helped to alleviate homesickness. Some were even adopted into the "big happy seminary family," a phrase used by a mixed-blood (1/32 Cherokee blood) to refer to the upper echelons of the student hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> Because of interruptions such as the Civil War, the destruction of the school by fire, smallpox epidemics, and alternate educational opportunities, not one student, not even a graduate (many of whom enrolled for more than ten semesters), remained in the seminary from first grade through graduation.<sup>18</sup>

Full-bloods who enrolled in the common schools usually learned to speak and read Cherokee, but many were not particularly happy about it and wanted the type of education offered at the seminary. A student at the Cave Springs common school who desired to attend the seminary stated that the common schools could not compete with the female seminary because "we can only interpret Sequoyah's alphabet."<sup>19</sup> After the 1870s, many of the neighborhood common schools taught in the Cherokee language for the benefit of the full-bloods; therefore, high school-age children who could not afford the seminary tuition were limited in their educational choices.

Some full-bloods who wanted a seminary education were willing to work for their tuition, but only a limited number of workers were allowed each semester. Some of the more acculturated full-blood girls at the seminary were from families that could afford the tuition. Thus these students were able to live with the mixed-bloods on the second floor, and enjoyed an elevated status. Many of them did not speak Cherokee, nor did they have



any interest in traditional Cherokee customs. As seminary alumna Charlotte Mayes Sanders recalls, the "full bloods went to Tahlequah to become like the white folk."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many of their families had already succeeded, and the children came to the seminary armed with the knowledge of white society necessary to function among their acculturated peers.

Especially in the early years, citizens of the Cherokee Nation charged that elitism and prejudice against the full-bloods existed at the seminary. But in 1854, progressive full-blood student Na-Li eloquently defended her seminary by stating, in *The Cherokee Rose Buds* (the newspaper of the seminary in the 1850s), that "it is sometimes said that our Seminaries were made only for the rich and those who were not full Cherokee; but it is a mistake. . . . Our Chief and directors would like very much that they [full Cherokees] should come and enjoy these same privileges as those that are here present."<sup>21</sup> Na-Li, however, had been adopted by a mission at an early age, had had a thorough primary education, and easily passed the admittance examination.

In further defense of her heritage and skin color, Na-Li asserted that although her parents were "full Cherokees . . . belonging to the common class," she felt it "no disgrace to be a full Cherokee. My complexion does not prevent me from acquiring knowledge and being useful hereafter. . . . [I will] endeavor to be useful, although I sometimes think that I cannot be."<sup>22</sup> It appears that the more Cherokee blood a girl had, or the more Indian she looked, the more she felt she had to prove herself as a scholar and as a useful member of a society that (she believed) valued only those women who were white in appearance and in attitude.

Na-Li probably was not entirely incorrect in her interpretation of the values of the mixed-bloods. Even progressive mixed-blood girls who were dark-skinned faced prejudice. Florence Waters (five-sixteenths Cherokee) was told by a lighter-skinned classmate that she could not participate in the elocution class production of "The Peri" because "[a]ngels are fair-haired and you are too dark for an angel."<sup>23</sup> When the full-blood girls did go to Tahlequah, and especially outside the Cherokee Nation, they had more difficulty adapting to society's "whiteness." In 1899, the preponderance of mixed-blood Cherokees in Tahlequah was illustrated by *Twin Territories* writer Ora Eddleman, who expressed



FIGURE 3. Female seminarians on the school's front porch, 1897.



dismay over the wealthy Cherokees and the "blond Cherokee women."<sup>24</sup>

The seminarians were indeed defensive about their hair and skin coloring. In an 1855 issue of *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, girls complained in an editorial about the Townsend, Massachusetts female seminary's paper, the *Lesbian Wreath*, which referred to the Cherokee girls as their "dusky sisters."<sup>25</sup> A popular practice of the Cherokee seminary's paper was to tell anecdotes and stories in which appearance was a prominent factor, particularly blue eyes. For example, one story tells of the consequences that young "Kate M." faced after plagiarizing a poem for literature class. "Fun and abundance," student Lurette writes, "peeped from her blue eyes . . . and the crimson blush stole upon her cheeks." In the same issue, author Inez writes about what her schoolmates might be doing in four years. One student is described as a "fair, gay, blue-eyed girl," and another is a "fairy-like creature with auburn hair." Still another story by student Icy, entitled "Two Companions," pairs Hope ("the very personification of loveliness") with a "tiny, blue-eyed child" named Faith.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, to the seminary students, blue eyes were the epitome of enlightenment and civilization.

Unquestionably ethnocentric, the seminarians were convinced of their superiority over individuals of other tribes. After a group of Osage men visited the seminary in 1855, student Irene wrote a romantic essay—not unlike those of white authors of the day—about the "lofty, symmetrical forms, and proud, free step, of these sons of nature just from their wild hunting ground." She found their war dance amusing ("those tall, dusky forms stomping and stooping around . . . making a wailing sound"). In comparing her tribe and theirs, she pointed out that the Osages listened attentively to the seminarians sing "Over There," because, she figured, at least the "wild and untutored Savage has an ear for music as well as the cultivated and refined."<sup>27</sup>

Other essays in *Rose Buds* include anecdotes about "hostile Indians" attacking peaceful Cherokees in the "wild and unknown regions" on the way to the California gold fields, and about "barbarous Camanches [*sic*]," living in their "wild wilderness." A student named Cherokee described a Seneca Dog Dance in which the drum "made a very disagreeable noise. . . . What there was in such music to excite the Senecas' belles is more than I can



imagine." Although she judged the dancers to be graceful, she believed they "ought to have been at something better."<sup>28</sup>

Many of the girls came from slave-holding families, yet the issue of slavery was not mentioned in any issues of the *Rose Buds*, nor in any of the female students' or teachers' memoirs. (A male seminarian later referred to a black man as a "nigger.") Separation of the Cherokee and Black races was a fact, however, and the children of the Black freedmen could only attend the "Negro High School."<sup>29</sup>

Yet at the same time that the "upper-class" Cherokees believed themselves to be elevated above the unenlightened members of their tribe and above other tribes as a whole, these same girls and teachers felt inferior to the whites, despite the fact that many of them had more "white blood" than Cherokee.<sup>30</sup> So they took every opportunity to flaunt their white ancestry. Female seminary superintendent and male seminary graduate Spencer Seago Stephens, for example, proclaimed in 1889 that "it is the white blood that has made us what we are. . . . [I]f missionaries wish to lift up Indian tribes . . . let them encourage intermarriage with whites." Unsure that the Cherokees could obtain a high level of civilization by themselves, he asserted that "intermarriage will accomplish the purpose quickly."<sup>31</sup>

Commentary from Cherokee citizens who shared Stephens's belief in the productive influence of association with whites appeared in the *Cherokee Advocate*. Writer "Cherokee" observed that "the gloom that pervades the red man's mind is fast disappearing: instead of darkness and doubt, his countenance is being lit up with intelligence." To indicate that the traditionalists of the tribe were perhaps heathenistic compared to their progressive peers, he further asserted that "those who cling with death-like tenacity to our old rites and ceremonies do not consider that a moral change is taking place in the [Cherokee] world."<sup>32</sup>

The attitude that the Cherokees needed a moral change was also illustrated in *The Sequoyah Memorial*, the newspaper of the Cherokee Male Seminary. One student wrote that "the bow and arrow have been laid aside," and that until the Cherokees reached the "summit of civilization and refinement," they could never be happy and contented.<sup>33</sup> Female seminary student Estelle stated, "O! that all, especially among the Cherokees could but learn the vast importance of a good education. This and this



FIGURE 4. Female and male seminary drama club members performing in blackface, 1896. This skit was entitled "De Dabatin' Club."



only will place us on equality with other enlightened and cultivated nations."<sup>34</sup>

Students were profoundly influenced by the comments of their chiefs. At the annual May picnic in 1877 celebrating the opening of the seminaries, acculturation advocate William Potter Ross expressed his fears that his tribe would be outdone by other tribes in Indian Territory: "While our neighboring Tribes and Nations are pressing forward in the pursuit of knowledge, let not the Cherokee . . . be second in the race." The last thing his tribe needed, he warned the seminarians, was "lazy and useless men" and "slouchy and slip-shod women."<sup>35</sup> And to make it clear that the Cherokees still had not reached that summit of equality with whites by 1884, Chief Dennis Bushyhead earnestly spoke of the importance of praying at the same altar with "our whiter and stronger brothers [giving] our common thanks to God . . . [that they] will show magnanimity and justice to their weaker brethren."<sup>36</sup>

Students also took pleasure in comparing the old Cherokee ways with the new and improved lifestyles of the tribe to show that many tribal members had progressed past savagery and were on their way to equality with whites. In an 1854 issue of the *Cherokee Rose Buds*, student Edith championed the virtues of nineteenth-century white society and boasted the progress the Cherokees had made: "Instead of the rudely constructed wigwams of our forefathers which stood there [the Park Hill area] not more than half-a-century ago," she wrote, "elegant white buildings are seen. Everything around denotes taste, refinement, and progress of civilization among our people."<sup>37</sup>

The prolific Na-Li collaborated with another student in 1855 to illustrate their uneducated ancestors' backwardness and, more importantly, to emphasize the vast improvements the tribe had made. In scene one of the essay "Two Scenes in Indian Land," Na-Li describes a "wild and desolate" estate of a Cherokee family composed of "whooping, swarthy-looking boys" and plaited-haired women, all of whom "bear a striking resemblance to their rude and uncivilized hut." She concludes that the poor imbeciles "pass the days of their wild, passive, uninteresting life without any intellectual pleasure or enjoyment," except, she adds, to attend the Green Corn Dance, a "kind of religious festival."<sup>38</sup>

Scene two, by author Fanny, paints a completely different picture of Cherokee life. In her commentary, even the environment



around the family's home has magically blossomed from the influence of the missionaries. "Civilization and nature are here united," she expounds. "Flowers, music, and even better, the *Holy Word of God* is here to study, showing that religion has shed its pure light over all." The Indian lad, "in place of his bow and arrow, is now taught to use the pen and wield the powers of eloquence." The girl, "instead of keeping time with the rattling of the terrapin shells [around her ankles], now keeps time with the chalk as her fingers fly nimbly over the blackboard." Fanny then professes her hope that "we may advance, never faltering until all the clouds of ignorance and superstition, and wickedness flee from before the rays of the Suns of Knowledge and Righteousness."<sup>39</sup> In these tales, then, there was the possibility that the "wild Cherokee Indian" could be changed and become a new person. The seminarians were not shy in vocalizing their hope that their unsophisticated peers would do the same.

Other passages reflect the students' feelings of inferiority to whites. The same *Rose Buds* issue that discusses "elegance and civilization" of the Cherokee Nation also compares the tribe unfavorably with the eastern United States by stating that the new bride of Chief John Ross, Mary Stapler, admirably left her more civilized surroundings in Philadelphia in order to "dwell with him in his *wild prairie* home."<sup>40</sup> Another editorial, commenting on the completed 1855 spring term, declares, "We present you again with a collection of Rosebuds, gathered from our Seminary garden. If, on examining them, you chance to find a withered or dwarfish bud, please pass it by. . . . We hope for lenient judgment, when our efforts are compared with those of our white sisters."<sup>41</sup> Another editorial, "Exchanges," acknowledges the newspapers received from other girls' schools in New England. But the Cherokee seminarians did not send copies of *Rose Buds* in return, because, as an editor explains, "we feel ourselves entirely too feeble to make any adequate recompense. . . . We are simply Cherokee school girls."<sup>42</sup>

In light of the reverence held for the Cherokee Female Seminary by the progressive tribal members, and considering the reason for its establishment, it is little wonder that the 212 girls who graduated from the seminary and, to a lesser extent, those who did not graduate but used their seminary education to obtain degrees from other institutions were considered the *crème de la crème* of the Cherokee Nation.<sup>43</sup> But that narrow-minded attitude ig-

nored the more than 2,770 girls<sup>44</sup> who did not graduate from the female seminary or from any other school. Granted, many girls left the seminary before they had completed their first semester, and some left after only one week. But their early departures do not necessarily indicate an inability to handle the workload or the social atmosphere of the school.

Some dropouts had had problems with the course of study, but not all of them had been unable to master the difficult subjects. According to the student grade lists from 1876 to 1903, most were able to cope with the Mount Holyoke-style curriculum.<sup>45</sup> Prior to their enrollment in the female seminary, many of the pupils had attended the Cherokee common schools, the Cherokee Orphan Asylum, or one of the missionary schools or other high schools outside the Cherokee Nation, and had reasonably good educational backgrounds.<sup>46</sup> In addition, many mixed-blood parents hired private tutors if their daughters had difficulty with their studies or if the common school teachers were incompetent.

The graduates, of course, made high grades (80s to 90s) throughout their careers at the seminary. Most of those who graduated were from comparatively affluent families, which enabled them to visit their homes more often than students from remote areas.<sup>47</sup> Many of the graduates were related and attended the school at the same time as their relatives, which helped to alleviate homesickness.<sup>48</sup> And, like successful students today, the girls who performed best received encouragement from their parents. Of the parents whose records could be examined, graduates' fathers had a 98 percent literacy rate, and their mothers 100 percent, compared to the 82 percent and 86 percent literacy rate of the non-graduates' fathers and mothers, respectively. Most of the full-bloods' parents could not write in English, and just 69 percent of their fathers and 55 percent of their mothers could read.<sup>49</sup> Only two of the graduates were full-bloods, and they had been adopted by white and mixed-blood parents and were educated in mission schools prior to seminary enrollment.<sup>50</sup>

Most of those who dropped out after one semester still made medium to high grades (70s to 90s). These dropouts usually left because of personal or family illness, an impending marriage, or homesickness. Other factors, such as the seminary's closure in 1856, the destructive fire in 1887, the departure of Principal Wilson in 1901, and the creation of Northeastern State Normal School in 1909, caused students to enroll in other schools. In



1893, several girls voluntarily went home because of the crowded living conditions. In 1902, because of the increased prosperity of the nation's farmers and the need for a "large force" to harvest crops, many students returned to the farm to do "home work."<sup>51</sup> A large number of these dropouts (except those who married immediately) enrolled in and graduated from other institutions.

Dropouts who had made low grades (50 or below) were in the minority. These students often left soon after enrolling (within the first day or month). Most were traditional full-bloods, or mixed-bloods of one-half to three quarters Cherokee, who had attended distant Cherokee-speaking common schools and were not prepared for the difficult curriculum or the oppressive white atmosphere of the school.

Indeed, while some Cherokees did want to send their children to the school but could not afford to, some full-bloods opposed the seminaries and did not send their children to them even if they had the money. Prejudice against traditional Cherokees was the parents' main argument, but they also had doubts about the practicality of the school's curriculum. The seminary met the expectations of the National Council, the teachers, and most of the nation's citizens, but some Cherokees protested that the academic curriculum was not applicable to the needs of the students.

This attitude was expressed in a letter to the *Cherokee Advocate* in 1881 signed "Bood Guy." The writer stated, "What our youngsters ought to be . . . are farmers and stock raisers." He doubted that the students heard "the words 'farm' or 'farming' during the entire three or four years' course of instruction." Preferring practical training over academic courses, the writer asked, "What sense or good is there in preparing our youth for their [white] business?" He concluded that both seminaries were merely "pieces of imitation, with the high schools of the United States for models," and therefore served no practical purpose in a nation composed mainly of farmers. The education that the students received, he believed, "ought to conform to, and fit them for, what they expect to become."<sup>52</sup> In 1880, out of a population of approximately 25,438, 3,550 Cherokees were farmers, 135 were mechanics, and 82 were teachers.<sup>53</sup>

The debate over educational priorities had begun as early as 1823, when Chief John Ross and Second Principal Chief Charles Hicks disagreed over the type of "national academy" the tribe should establish. Ross advocated the traditional, New England-



style school, while Hicks championed what he believed was the most practical education for the tribe, a vocational school.<sup>54</sup> The council disregarded Hicks's suggestion, and thirty-three years later Indian agent W. A. Duncan reported that the seminaries still "were only producing intellectuals . . . [but] not everyone can become a professional . . . [or] live here without manual labor."<sup>55</sup> Because of pressure from tribal members who wanted vocational training to be available, the National Council gave the board of education permission to declare the boarding schools "industrial or manual labor boarding schools."<sup>56</sup>

Within the next few years, principal chiefs Dennis Bushyhead and Joel B. Mayes took a strong interest in the accomplishments of the seminaries. Bushyhead acknowledged the "gratifying results" of the seminaries' curriculum, but in 1881 he advocated using more of the tax revenue for a mandatory "system of manual labor" for the primary grade students (who were usually from poor, farming families) that would be "optional" for upper grades. In the 1890s Chief Mayes tried to persuade the National Council to purchase Fort Gibson for use as an industrial school, but the council was not receptive to the idea, presumably because most of the councilmen's children attended the seminaries and had no intentions of becoming farmers or laborers.<sup>57</sup>

The Department of the Interior's annual report for 1899 stated that instead of "being taught the domestic arts [girls] are given . . . Latin and mathematics while branches of domestic economy are neglected. The dignity of work receives no attention at their hands."<sup>58</sup> The seminary administrators yielded to the pressure, and by 1905 the school's "domestic science" department included lessons in cooking, cleaning (dusting and making their beds; a laundress washed their clothes), sewing (usually to mend torn clothes; only a few girls became skilled seamstresses), and a modest agricultural program that featured botany, gardening, and flower arrangement.<sup>59</sup>

Many alumnae did become agriculturalists, but others had a profound interest in the whites' more lucrative businesses. Because many of their parents and siblings owned and operated stores in Tahlequah or other parts of the Cherokee Nation, the girls already had developed the confidence to pursue careers in the business world and were not afraid to interact with whites. In addition, many of the more progressive girls came from families who had hired help to perform domestic chores.

The girls who graduated were, as a whole, the most acculturated and affluent students at the seminary. After graduation, they became, among other things, educators, businesswomen, physicians, stockraisers, and prominent social workers.<sup>60</sup> They also followed their mothers' examples and "married well." Of the 212 graduates, at least 189 eventually married. Most of them married white men or men who had a smaller amount of Cherokee blood than they had. In a few cases, the husbands had a greater degree of Indian blood, but in every such instance, they were either physicians, politicians, or members of prominent (usually wealthy) Cherokee families.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the more white blood the woman had, the more apt she was to marry a non-Cherokee, a tribal member with high social status, or a man who at least had the same degree of white blood that she possessed. Indicative of the latter were the fifteen women who married graduates of the male seminary.<sup>62</sup>

Another interesting aspect was and is the value placed upon blood quantum as a source of identity. Many of the girls who went to the seminaries often had brothers and sisters who did not attend. In a comparison of the quantum of entire families, it is apparent that the women who married white men, or men with a lesser degree of Cherokee blood than they had, had tended during enrollment to claim a lesser degree of Cherokee blood than their siblings—perhaps in an attempt to appear "whiter," while at the same time retaining their Cherokee identity. In contrast to the value systems of the seminarians, many of their descendants today claim a Dawes Roll error and argue that their ancestors were much more Cherokee than they said they were. It appears that there is a movement among many Americans to find or inflate their Cherokee roots, a distinct contrast to many of the seminarians who were more interested in their non-Indian backgrounds.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the differences of opinion between the traditional and the progressive Cherokees over education, and despite the school's class system, the Cherokee Female Seminary survived as a tribal institution for over five decades.<sup>64</sup> The hundreds of Cherokee girls who passed through its halls were profoundly influenced—both positively and negatively—by their experiences at the school.

The girls' seminary experiences helped to strengthen their identities as Cherokees, although there were differences in opin-



ion as to what a Cherokee really was. At least 30 percent were of one-sixteenth degree or less Cherokee blood,<sup>65</sup> yet they still considered themselves to be Cherokees. Many girls never even heard the Cherokee language. One student admitted years later, "I did not realize what my Indian heritage meant to me when I attended the Cherokee Female Seminary."<sup>66</sup> All she heard was the word *Cherokee* and assumed that all tribal members lived like the seminarians. But the full-bloods who were fluent in their native language and who participated in tribal ceremonies also saw themselves as Cherokees, and their tenure at what they regarded as an oppressive school only strengthened their ties to their traditional families.

Both the progressive and the traditional tribal members considered themselves to be more Cherokee than the other. The progressives believed that because of their enlightening educational and religious experiences, their intermarriage with whites, and their successful reestablishment in Indian Territory after their removal from the East, they were the new and improved Cherokees. The traditionalists, on the other hand, did not view the mixed-bloods as Cherokees but as non-Indian "sell outs" or, at best, "white Cherokees." Interestingly, just like many mixed-bloods today, the Cherokee women who looked Caucasian found that their appearance, in combination with their educational backgrounds, gave them an advantage: They were able to slip back and forth between the white and Cherokee cultures (or at least the Cherokee culture they were used to), depending on their needs.

Not all tribal members subscribed to the school's philosophy, but a large portion of them did. Although there undoubtedly was prejudice against the traditional girls—and these students were often devastated by their seminary experiences—full-bloods were at least exposed to the ways of white society, and the mixed-blood girls had the opportunity to interact for a short time with less acculturated tribal members.

The female seminary is remembered for what it stood for: acculturation, assimilation, enlightenment, or survival, depending on the needs and values of the alumnae. The school was not meant for every female Cherokee; the seminary's atmosphere and attitude were white, and the progressive Cherokees were attempting to acculturate their peers. While the school contributed to a detrimental class system, the education it offered gave a



FIGURE 5. Members of the class of 1903, left to right: Leola "Lee" Ward Newton, Grace Wallace Richards, Caroline "Carrie" Freeman Baird, and Laura Effie Duckworth Boatright. All four were 1/32 Cherokee blood.



strong educational background to those who went on to colleges and universities and was invaluable to the acculturated girls' success in business and in social circles within and outside of the Cherokee Nation.

Despite its shortcomings, the Cherokee Female Seminary was unquestionably the catalyst for the prosperity of many Cherokee women and their families. To many Cherokees, the old female seminary building, which now stands on the campus of Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, remains a symbol of adaptation and progress in a changing, and often inhospitable, world.

#### NOTES

1. See Devon I. Abbott, "The History of the Cherokee Female Seminary: 1851-1910" (Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Christian University, 1989) and "'Commendable Progress': Acculturation at the Cherokee Female Seminary," *American Indian Quarterly* 11 (Summer 1987): 187-201. The total enrollment is estimated, because ten years of seminary rolls are missing. Although thirty years of rolls are available, my estimate of the enrollment is lower than the apparent totals on the rolls, because many girls attended the seminary for more than one year. For this study, their names were recorded only once—for a total of almost 3,000 different names.

2. "An Act in Relation to the Male and Female Seminaries, and Establishing Primary Departments Therein for the Education of Indigent Children," 28 November 1873, in *Constitutions and Laws of the Cherokee Nation* (St. Louis: R. and T. A. Ennis Stationers, Printers and Book Binders, 1975) vol. 7 of the *Constitutions and Laws of the American Indian Tribes*, 267-69.

3. Not all full-bloods were traditional and/or poor, nor were all mixed-bloods progressive and/or wealthy.

4. Thomas Lee Ballenger, *Names of Students of Cherokee Male and Female Seminaries, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, from 1876 to 1904*, in Special Collections, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

5. "Ann Florence Wilson's Grade Book" or "Cherokee Female Seminary Records of Grades, 1876-1909," in Northeastern State University's Office of Admissions and Records, Administration Building, Tahlequah.

6. Letter dated 10 September 1889, in Cherokee Female Seminary Miscellaneous Box, archives, NSU.

7. The students' socioeconomic backgrounds were compiled by the author, using the Index to the Five Civilized Tribes, the Final Dawes Roll, M1186, roll 1, and the Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, rolls 2-15, cards 1-11132, at the Federal Archives in Fort Worth, Texas.

8. *Ibid.*, in combination with Emmett Starr, *History of the Cherokee Indians, Their Legends and Folklore* (Muskogee: Hoffman Printing, Inc., 1984), 489-680.

9. Personal interview with Pearl Mayes Langston, 6 June 1989, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma.

10. Albert Sydney Wyly to John D. Benedict (1908), letter in Miscellaneous Female Seminary Box, archives, NSU.

11. For information on Ann Florence Wilson, see Devon I. Abbott, "Ann Florence Wilson, Matriarch of the Cherokee Seminary," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 67 (Winter 1989-90): 426-37.

12. Maggie Culver Fry, comp., *Cherokee Female Seminary Years: A Cherokee National Anthology by Many Tribal Authors* (Claremore, OK: Rogers State College Press, 1988), 83.

13. Kate O'Donald Ringland to Abraham Knepler, 21 April 1938 (Knepler, Ph.D. dissertation, "Digest of the Education of the Cherokee Indians," Yale University, 1939, 323).

14. Personal interview with Rick Corley, 27 December 1988, Arlington, Texas.

15. *Cherokee Advocate*, 23 August 1873, 2.

16. "Wilson's Grade Book."

17. Personal interview with Charlotte Mayes Sanders, 20 October 1988, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

18. "Wilson's Grade Book."

19. *Cherokee Advocate*, 2 May 1884.

20. Interview with Sanders.

21. *The Cherokee Rose Buds*, 2 August 1854, 2.

22. Ibid.

23. Fry, *Cherokee Female Seminary Years*, 104-105.

24. *Twin Territories*, June 1899.

25. *Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 14 February 1855, 2, at Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

26. Ibid., 5; *Cherokee Rose Buds*, 2 August 1854, 6, at archives, NSU.

27. *Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 14 February 1855, 5.

28. Ibid., 4, 6.

29. Thomas L. Ballenger, "The Colored High School of the Cherokee Nation," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 30 (Winter 1952-53): 454-62.

30. The students' blood quantum was derived by the author from the census records and the Index to the Five Civilized Tribes, the Final Dawes Roll, M1186, roll 1, and the Enrollment Cards for the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, M1186, rolls 2-15, cards 1-11132, at the Federal Archives. The Final Dawes Roll has many errors in regards to the Cherokees' blood quantum, so cross-references of other family members were used. If the student died prior to the opening of the rolls, the quantum was found via either siblings, children, or parents. Married names were located on the census records, in newspapers, and in Emmett Starr, *History of the Cherokees*. A few of the early students, graduates, and husbands had died, leaving no progeny and thus no clue as to their degree of Cherokee blood, but only two were reported to be full-bloods. Some of the students during the later years (1903-1909) were not enrolled, because they were recent arrivals to Indian Territory.

31. *Kansas City Times*, 29 July 1889, 2. Stephens's comment almost echoes Thomas Jefferson's speech to Indians visiting Washington, D.C. in 1808, when he said, "You will unite yourselves with us, join in our great councils and form one people with us, and we shall all be Americans; you will mix with us by marriage, your blood will run in our veins, and will spread with us over this great continent." In Saul K. Padover, *Thomas Jefferson on Democracy* (New York: Mentor, New American Library, Appleton-Century Co., 1939) 106-107, quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 37.



32. *Cherokee Advocate*, 4 February 1851, 2.
33. *The Sequoyah Memorial*, 2 August 1855, in archives, NSU.
34. *Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 14 February 1855, 3.
35. *The Journal*, 17 May 1877, 1.
36. Cited in V. A. Travis, "Life in the Cherokee Nation a Decade after the Civil War," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 4 (March 1926), 30.
37. *Cherokee Rose Buds*, 2 August 1854, 3.
38. *Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 1 August 1855, 1-2.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Cherokee Rose Buds*, 2 August 1854, 3.
41. *Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, 1 August 1855, 4.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Statement by Professor Rudi Halliburton at the 17th Annual Symposium on the American Indian, 3-8 April 1989 at NSU.
44. See Abbott, "History of the Cherokee Female Seminary," Appendix A for some of the nonseminary graduates and the colleges and universities they enrolled in.
45. "Wilson's Grade Book."
46. See N. B. Johnson, "The Cherokee Orphan Asylum," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34 (Summer 1956): 159-82.
47. The students' home districts were compiled from the 1880 Cherokee Census and Index, schedules 1-6, 7RA-07, rolls 1-4, and the 1890 Cherokee Census (no index), schedules 1-4, 7RA-08, rolls 1-4 at Federal Archives and Records Center, Fort Worth, Texas; "Wilson's Grade Book"; "Mary Stapler's Class Book" at archives, NSU; *Catalog of the C.N.F.S., 1896 and Announcements for 1897 and 1898*, 3-6, at archives, NSU; *Souvenir Catalog: 1850-1905* at archives, NSU; "Register and Accounts of Female Seminary Primary and Boarding School Students," bound ledger in archives, NSU.
48. At least one hundred families sent three or more children—including sisters and cousins—to attend the seminary at the same time.
49. The parents' literacy rates were compiled from the 1880 Cherokee Census and Index, schedules 1-6, 7RA-07, rolls 1-4, and the 1890 Cherokee Census (no index), schedules 1-4, 7RA-08, rolls 1-4, at Federal Archives.
50. Catherine Hastings Maxfield, 1855, and Martha Whiting Fox, 1856. The 1880 Cherokee Census and Index, schedules 1-6, 7RA-07, rolls 1-4.
51. *Cherokee Advocate*, 9 September 1893, 2; *ibid.*, 16 September 1893, 2; *ibid.*, 30 September 1893, 2; *ibid.*, 7 October 1893, 2; *ibid.*, 14 October 1893, 2; Coppock to Benedict, 11 July 1901, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (RCIA)*, 57 Cong., 1st sess., H. Doc. 5 (serial 4291), 318-19; CHN 97, *Cherokee Schools: Female Seminary, Documents 2735-2777*, 11 May 1887-December 1902, at Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.
52. *Cherokee Advocate*, 31 August 1881, 1.
53. Leslie Hewes, *Occupying the Cherokee Country of Oklahoma* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, new series, No. 57, 1978), 39, *op. cit.*
54. Ard Hoyt to Jeremiah Evarts, 14 August 1823, American Board Commissioners Foreign Missions, letter 104, ABC, 18.3.1, vol. 3, quoted in William McLoughlin's *The Cherokee Ghost Dance* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 494.
55. Report of W. A. Duncan, 25 September 1856, *RCIA for 1853*, 34th Cong., 3rd sess., H. Exec. Doc. 1 (serial 893), 692.

56. Sec. 20 of "An Act Relating to Education," in *Compiled Laws of the Cherokee Nation* (Tahlequah, I.T.: National Advocate Print, 1881), vol. 9 of *Constitutions and Laws of the American Indian Tribes* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1973), 236.

57. "Fourth Annual Message of Chief Dennis W. Bushyhead," in *Annual Messages of Hon. Chief D. W. Bushyhead*, 33, Special Collections, NSU; *Cherokee Advocate*, 17 November 1889, 1; message of Chief Joel B. Mayes to National Council, 17 November 1889, in *Cherokee Letter Book*, vol. 14, p. 4, and J. B. Mayes to T. J. Morgan, 18 October 1890, in *Cherokee Letter Book*, vol. 3, p. 11, Phillips Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman.

58. *RCIA for 1899*, 56th Cong., 2d sess., H. Doc. 5 (serial 3915), 92.

59. *Cherokee Female Seminary Souvenir Catalog: 1850-1906*, at archives, NSU.

60. See Abbott, "History of the Cherokee Female Seminary," 181-89, and Appendices B-E.

61. See *ibid.*, 212-13 for the girls' husbands.

62. See *ibid.*, Appendix G for seminarians who married each other.

63. These assertions are based on findings in the 1880 and 1890 Cherokee Census Records, and the Dawes Rolls and Enrollment Cards. Additionally, in almost every interview I conducted during my study of the history of the female seminary, the subjects asserted that they were indeed more Cherokee than they appeared, because, "the Dawes Roll is wrong." My comment regarding Americans' affinity towards the Cherokee tribe is based on the startling numbers of students, colleagues, and acquaintances who have told me that they have a "full-blood Cherokee" mother or grandmother. Unfortunately, few of these individuals can substantiate their claims, since their ancestors were invariably "out of town" during the enrollment.

64. The female seminary was open for business for forty academic years.

65. Statistics compiled from the 1880 Cherokee Census and Index, schedules 1-6, 7RA-07, rolls 1-4, and the 1890 Cherokee Census (no index), schedules 1-4, 7RA-08, rolls 1-4, at Federal Archives.

66. M. Fry, *Cherokee Female Seminary Years*, 157.