

“struggles for the ball”:

Searching for the game of Stickball from George Catlin to Modern Times by Robert Perry

As a young man, George Catlin put aside his practice of law to paint portraits and miniatures in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Catlin was gifted, and good enough at his craft (even without formal training) to be elected to the Pennsylvania Academy of Art at age twenty eight, but he yearned for subject matter beyond the portraits that others often commissioned him to paint. He desired images and surroundings that would ignite his passion and elevate his work. For Catlin, that passion would be kindled in the Far West. As the story goes, one day he chanced upon a delegation of Indians from the “Far West” who stopped over in Philadelphia briefly on their way to Washington D.C. The sight of these Native American men in their traditional attire spurred on Catlin’s restless spirit; he decided to become their self-appointed visual historian. He painted the portraits of some Indians that visited New York in 1826. However, those acculturated Indians, some of whom lived in farm log house dwellings and who wore suits and dresses of cloth, were not the type of subjects Catlin sought. So he ventured west during the years of 1830 - 1836. This collection of trips became his odyssey into the Far West. During that time Catlin made hundreds of field sketches of Native Americans and scenes of Indian life. He then transformed some of them into a few good studio prints and wrote about his time in the West. His first art show, “Catlin’s Indian Gallery,” was shown in 1837; admission was fifty cents. The admission fee did not cover Catlin’s expenses. So he took his Indian gallery on the road, eventually landing in Europe in 1839. There he ultimately went bankrupt. Not until the 1940’s were his paintings given the acclaim they deserved as a record of the Far West.

Catlin spent the winter of 1833 in Florida resting from his travels in Indian Country. In February he received a letter from the War Department permitting him to accompany the newly formed First Dragoons under the command of Col. Henry Dodge and, second in command, Lt. Col. Stephen Kearney. This expedition would be the Dragoons’ first to meet the various tribes to the south and the west, tribes like the Comanche, Kiowa, and Wichita. Catlin was given a wonderful opportunity to observe and record many events that occurred on the frontier, some of the earliest observations about the Native inhabitants of the Southern Plains. One of the Dragoon’s missions dealing with the Comanche took Catlin to what would later become the lands of the Chickasaw after their removal to Indian Territory. He gives perhaps what is the first written account of the area known today as Kullihoma.

Acting on a report of a Comanche massacre, the Dragoons were directed to obtain the release of a white boy and a ranger believed to be held prisoner. The troops marched toward the junction of the False Washita and Red Rivers (north of present-day Dennison TX.) General Leavenworth planned to go the first two hundred miles in command, and then leave the Comanche campaign to the officers Col. Dodge and Lt. Col. Kearney. The march took ten days. On the fifth day, June 26, the Dragoons reached Buffalo Valley (seven miles east of Ada), where there was an encampment of 500-600 Osage Indians. This same place became important to education, ceremony, and stickball for the Chickasaw.

While in the West, Catlin continued his observations in word and picture about the Native peoples he encountered. Part of what he recorded included his descriptions of stickball. Catlin even became a sort of stickball fanatic. So during the fall of 1834, he went to the Choctaw Agency at Skullyville, Mississippi and there observed the game:

I have made it a uniform rule whilst in the Indian Country to attend every ball-play I could hear of, if I could do it by riding a distance of twenty or thirty miles; and my usual custom has been on such occasions, to straddle the back of my horse, and look on to the best advantage. In this way I have sat, and oftentimes reclined, and almost dropped from my horse's back, with irresistible laughter at the succession of droll tricks, and kicks and scuffles which ensue, in the almost superhuman struggles for the ball.

While at the Choctaw Agency it was announced, that there was to be a great play on a certain day, within a few miles. Monday afternoon at three o'clock, I rode out with Lieutenants S. and M. to the ballplay ground of the Choctaws, where we found several thousand Indians encamped. There were two points of timber about a mile apart, in which the two parties for the play with their respective families and friends were encamped; and lying between them, the prairie on which the game was to be played.

During the afternoon, we loitered about amongst the different tents and shanties of the two encampments, and afterwards, at sundown, witnessed the ceremony of measuring out of the grounds, and erecting the "byes" or goals where to guide the play. Each party had their goal made with two upright posts, about 25 feet high and six feet apart, set firm in the ground, with a pole across the top. These goals were about forty or fifty rods (600-800) feet apart; and at point just half way between, was another small stake, driven down, where the ball was to be thrown up at the firing of a gun, to be struggled for by the players. All this preparation was made by some old men, who were, it seems, selected to be the judges of the play, who drew a line from one bye to the other; to which directly came from the woods on both sides a great concourse of women, men, boys and girls, and dogs and horses, where bets were made on the play. The betting was all done across this line, and seemed to be chiefly left to the women. Goods and chattel, - knives - dresses - blankets - pots and kettles - dogs and horses, and guns; all were placed in the possession of the stake-holders, who sat by them, and watched them on the ground, all night, preparatory to the play.

Soon after dark, a procession of lighted flambeaux was seen coming from each encampment, to the ground where the players assembled around their respective byes; and at the beat of the drums and the chants of the women, each party of players commenced the "ball-play dance." Each party danced for a quarter of an hour around their respective byes in ballplay dress; rattling ballsticks together in the most violent manner, and all singing as loud as they could raise their voices; whilst the women of each party, who had their goods at stake, formed into two rows on the line between the two parties of players, and danced also in uniform step, and all their voices joined in chants to the Great Spirit; in which they were soliciting his favour in deciding the game to their advantage; and also encouraging the players to exert every power they possessed, in the struggle to ensue. In the mean time, four old medicine men, who were to be judges of the play, were seated at the point where the ball was to be started; and busily smoking

to their Great Spirit for their success in judging rightly, and impartially, between the parties in so important an affair.

This dance was one of the most picturesque scenes imaginable, and was repeated at intervals of every half hour during the night, and exactly in the same manner; so that the players were certainly awake all night, and arranged in their appropriate dress, prepared for the play which was to commence at none o'clock the next morning. In the morning; at the hour, the two parties and all their friends, were drawn out and over the ground; when at length the game commenced, by the judges throwing up the ball at the firing of a gun; when an instant struggled ensued between the players, who were some six or seven hundred in numbers.

Every weapon, by rule of all ball-players, is laid by in their respective encampments, and no man allowed to go for one; so that the sudden broils that take place on the ground, are presumed to be to be as suddenly settled without any probability of much personal injury; and no one is allowed in any way to interfere with the contentious individuals.

For each time that the ball was passed between the stakes of either party, one was counted for their game, and a halt of about one minute; when it was started by the judges of the play, and similar struggled ensued, and so on until the successful party arrived at 100, which was the limit of the game, and accomplished at an hour's sun, when they took the stakes; and then, by previous agreement, produced a number of jugs of whiskey, which gave all a wholesome drink, and sent them all off merry and in good humor, but not drunk.

To the artist, this game was worthy to record in words and in paint. He observed the ceremony and asked questions through translators. From the Indian viewpoint this "miniature war" of stickball may be a different kind of rivalry.

The Chickasaws, in 1856, purchased land from western lands of the Choctaw Nation. The north-to-south tribal boundary line passed west of Buffalo Valley, where stickball games continued between the tribes. In the 1890's stickball was played at Yellow Hill, a Choctaw ballfield south of McAlester, I.T. (then Coal County). Coal County Chickasaws were playing Atoka County Choctaws in what might be called the World Series of Indian Stickball. Describing the play of one of these stickball contests J. C. Packer wrote:

"The first goal was made by a Choctaw named Mose Burris. Each time he stepped on the field at the beginning of a contest he received frenzied applause from some of the fans, and decisive shouts from others, especially the squaws in the cheering section on the other side. They hated him. Many rival players were out to "get" him. Scores to win a game varied. Usually the number was determined by previous brawls between well matched teams. If there had been some devastating punishment inflicted in the last game, the goal was set unusually low - maybe four, six or eight. It was legal to trip, shove, slug, "rassle", pull hair, knock an opponent down, or try to brain him with a bat. About the only penalty assessed was for slamming a knee into a downed opponent's stomach or trying to cave in his ribs. For doing this, the offending Indian's team had to forfeit four tallies. The Choctaws won the game that day."

Stickball was also played nearer the tribal boundary. This site was chosen because of abundant underground springs, which is why Catlin found the Osage Village in the Buffalo Valley. One of the most talked about games occurred in the spring of 1903 between the Choctaws and the Chickasaws who lived on either side of the north-south tribal land boundary. About 300 people gathered to watch the game. A stickball game alone is very rough play. A fight erupted among the spectators that could not be stopped. It took the intervention by U.S. Marshall and Light Horsemen to end the game and send everyone home. The game ended the stickball games between the tribal factions. The Chickasaw Historical Society has commemorated the site of this historic game by erecting a granite marker. The inscription. Mose Burris was a player and one of the U.S. Marshall's, Mose and his half brother Cornelius Donegay are identified Choctaw players in the team photo.

Since stickball games have not recently been played with the intensity of 100 years ago, the Chickasaw Historical Society sponsored a demonstration stickball game on June 15, 2003 at a Chickasaw Renewal Gathering at Kullihoma. Tim Harjo of Chickasaw Nation Cultural Resources Department was in charge of arrangements. The team played without pads or helmets or the influence of medicine men.

Players were banned from hitting each other with sticks, tripping or pulling hair. The goals were spaced closer together than in historic games. Choctaw players were invited for a specific Saturday afternoon. It rained hard and the game could not be called off, so the team played in the rain. Players skidded in the mud trying to pick up the ball with two sticks, while avoiding the impact of other players. The final score of the game was Choctaws five, Chickasaws two.

Bibliography:

1. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians* (New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1973) vol. II. Pp 123-129.
2. C.J. Packer, "Choctaw Stickball Champion," *Frontier Times* (March 1966):12-14.