

## Opothleyahola Podcast Transcript

Narrator: Opothleyahola is hailed by some as the Abraham Lincoln of the Upper Creek Muskogeese. After serving his people in the War of 1812 and the Creek War, in which various factions of Muskogee Indians clashed over white encroachment, Yahola swore allegiance to the United States. Tragically, his staunch loyalty to the Union would lead him and his people into one of the most catastrophic incidents of the Civil War.

Also known by his nickname “Old Gouge,” Yahola was born in Alabama in the waning years of the eighteenth century. The Muskogeese, also known as Creeks, were driven from their Alabama and Georgia homes to what is now Arkansas and Oklahoma during Indian Removal in the 1820s and 1830s. In the decades between Indian Removal and the start of the Civil War, Yahola had built a substantial estate, which included a 2000-acre plantation and 25 slaves.

Despite the tribes’ geographic and cultural ties to the South, many Muskogeese and others were either loyal to the Union or hoped to remain neutral during the Civil War. These took refuge at Yahola’s plantation, according to Emma Crites of the Historical Society in Fredonia, Kansas.

Emma: They were congregating at Opothleyahola’s ranch or property in Indian Territory, and as the disagreements grew, the numbers increased so on his property that their cattle and horses had eaten all the grass and they were facing starvation so they were going to have to do something and he made the decision that to go to Kansas was the thing to do to get away from having to take part in the Civil War.

Narrator: In the early days of the Civil War, Southern emissaries met with tribes in Indian Territory to earn their support for the Confederate cause. When the Union army abandoned its posts in Arkansas and Oklahoma, loyal Indians, like Yahola, were exposed to Confederate raids. In 1861, Yahola left his plantation to lead as many as 10,000 followers on a treacherous wintry 14-day journey to Union territory in Kansas.

Their refusal to side with the South made Yahola’s followers the target of attacks from their Southern neighbors, including Confederate-loyal Muskogeese and others. Their foes would not allow Yahola to leave without a fight – and brutally attacked them along the way.

Woodson County Commissioner Gwendolyn Martin provides an account of the battles that ensued.

Gwen: the first battle they lost a lot of their supplies that they had taken with them in their wagons. But the second battle, they were pretty much, I believe they were fighting at night. It was a surprise attack and they lost everything. And being the dead of winter, game was scarce, food was scarce and they were running for their lives for safety.

Emma: The journey was interrupted several times by attacks from the Confederate sympathizers. Each time they managed to escape until they got close to Tulsa, or present-day Tulsa. It was called Tulsy Town then. At that point they were surprised in the night and it was storming. That was what resulted in continuing tragedy for several years to come. They fled without food, without clothing, without any of their transportation. It was sleeting and became a snowstorm and it was really a tragic situation.

- Narrator: Yahola and his band followed the Verdigris and Fall Rivers to northern Wilson County, Kansas. They hoped to seek refuge at Fort Row, where they believed the Union Army would protect them.
- Emma: They were primarily coming to Fort Row thinking that they would find refuge and food and shelter and everything. When they got there, Fort Row was a small garrison of less than about 200 square feet. It was a storage facility only for the Home Guard people that were preparing for the Border War.
- There was a census taken in 1862 of the Indians. And I believe there were around 6,000 by that time. They were trickling in, 60 to 90 a day, starting in December of 1861. And that continued most of the winter.
- They had no idea the Indians were coming. The Indians had no way actually to let them know.
- Narrator: With no warning and few resources, the 70 to 80 men garrisoned at Fort Row were woefully incapable of meeting the needs of thousands refugees during the dead of winter. This left a desperate Yahola pleading with the federal government for protection and aid.
- Yahola: We came here not to live at the expense of the government, but were compelled to flee before a superior force of its enemies, and expected to find here the protection that your government was unable to extend to us in our own Country ... We desire not to be moved further North even to be fed – we now buy many of our supplies with our own individual means ... Send us ammunition and transportation as early as possible – we ask no more – Will our Great Father grant this just request and petition of his Loyal Children?" *Yahola* (186)
- Emma: Their response was very, very slow because the state of Kansas itself was preoccupied with what we call the Border War, the skirmishes between Missouri and Kansas. And the federal government intended to do something but they just never quite got around to it.
- Narrator: When the army finally responded, it encountered 4,500 Indians living in a landscape littered with the carcasses of an estimated 1,200-1,500 dead ponies.
- Emma: That's when tragedy started, with freezing to death and starvation. There are stories from individuals in that area telling about hundreds of Indian bones, ponies, their horses, who died from starvation and freezing to death, just littered the ground like snow.
- Narrator: To assist them, the federal agents were equipped with only five wagonloads of supplies, including quilts, 40 pairs of socks, 3 pairs of pantaloons, 7 undershirts, 4 pairs of drawers, a few shirts, pillows, and pillow cases. Army Surgeon A. B. Campbell noted that the paltry response proved too little too late.
- Male Voice: Their only protection from the snow upon which they lie is prairie grass, and from the wind and weather scraps and rags stretched upon switches; some of them had personal clothing; most had but shreds and rags, which did not conceal their nakedness, and I saw several ranging in age from three to fifteen years, without one thread upon their bodies.

Many have their toes frozen off, others have feet wounded by sharp ice, or branches of trees lying in the snow; but few have shoes or moccasins. Why the officers of the Indian Department are not doing something for them I cannot understand; common humanity demands that more should be done at once, to save them from total destruction. *A. B. Campbell*

Narrator: In the first month alone, 240 Creeks died. According to Gwen Martin, adequate aid did not arrive for months.

Gwen: There was an Indian agent sent down, word got around and an Indian agent came down from LeRoy and wrote the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I don't believe they really believed the extreme conditions that the Indians were in. Eventually through correspondence, they did send an agent from Washington to come out. And he wrote the truth that matched the first letter that they sent in, I believe it was February. And it wasn't until June that they received help.

It was a group of soldiers from LeRoy that came in. And they brought wagons and transported the Indians out. They did try, before that, they did try to bring in blankets and food. And some of the food that they received was not good food. Bacon that the military refused to eat, specifically was written in the journals. They didn't receive the help that they should have. In June, I believe, the army sent three men to come into Belmont to establish three buildings to hold the Indians' supplies and to issue supplies to the Indians.

Emma: Most of them stayed at Fort Row. And the Army, then, moved those who needed medical attention to Belmont in Woodson County. And then the healthy ones from both places were moved by the Army several months later to LeRoy. And there was not a real encampment at LeRoy, they just camped out up and down the river.

Yahola: "We felt that we sojourned among friends. Our people when compelled to leave their homes, were in a prosperous condition – possessed well improved farms, and were living in houses far better than those we see in southern Kansas."  
*Yahola*

Narrator: Hollie Yoho of the Woodson County Chamber of Commerce remarks on Yahola's tragic change of fate.

Hollie: He was in those times considered a rich man. He had his plantation, he had a wife. Looking at it, whenever he was up here, he was in a tent made of a blanket that didn't even reach all the way to the ground. It says that there was two feet from the ground and he was laying in this tent. That's sad, it's sad that, this man who was an affluent man and he had all these things, moving up from.

Narrator: Yahola and his followers pled with the army to assist them in re-capturing their adopted homeland from the Confederates. But the great Muskogee leader would never see his home again. Like so many of his followers, Yahola died in Kansas. Indian Superintendent Colonel W. F. Coffin met with Yahola in his last days.

Male Voice: On arriving here I found the great king on his deathbed; and though evidently struggling with the grim monster, yet possesses all the wonderful powers of mind that have characterized him through life, and forced the conviction upon all who have come in contact with him that he was no ordinary man. He manifests in an

extraordinary degree that attachment for his people that has been the ruling passion of his life. *Colonel W. F. Coffin*

Emma: I understand that he was in a meeting with other Indian leaders and agents, somewhere near Leavenworth when he died of the pneumonia that he came here with.

Narrator: Yahola's daughter died while he was seeking help for his people.

Gwen: When the Indian agent was sent in to look at the conditions and write his first letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he found her dying in the fields with hardly anything covering her body, no tents, anything.

Narrator: The great leader was buried near his daughter at Fort Belmont.

Despite the loss of their leader, Opothleyahola's followers carried on. Their pleas with the federal government bore fruit in 1862, with the establishment of the First Regiment of the Indian Home Guard. The regiment was made up of Muskogee and Seminole Indians and blacks who had joined them in their exodus to Kansas, commanded by white officers.

Gwen: They were established in LeRoy after the Indians were rescued and were sent out. There was a great debate in Washington whether you could really trust the Indians to carry through on any sort of action that they would see. There was debate back and forth in the Lincoln Papers on that. But they were established and they did see two skirmishes, I believe. They were established there in LeRoy.

Narrator: The blacks who fought in the Indian Home Guard were the first blacks to fight against the Confederacy. Because they spoke both English and Indian dialects, they served as interpreters between the Indian soldiers and their white officers.

After the war, Native Americans who served in the regiment returned to Indian Territory. However, according to the state census records, many of the blacks who had accompanied Yahola in his exodus and enlisted in the Indian Home Guard remained in Kansas communities like Humboldt.

Despite their service to the Union, the loyal Indians were forced to fight to seek reparation for the property they lost in the war.

Gwen: And it took, they brought suit against the United States to regain what they had lost during the conflict, or during the war. That went on for a period of 15 years or so, I mean, until the government finally settled. So they finally gave them a portion, a portion of a penny for every dollar they lost, which is amazing.

Narrator: Yahola and his followers followed the Neosho and Verdigris River into Kansas. They first camped at Fort Row in present-day Wilson County, Kansas. Those in need of medical attention were moved to Fort Belmont in present-day Woodson County, Kansas. Yahola was buried there. Those who joined the Indian Home Guard were mustered at LeRoy in present-day Coffey County, Kansas. Highway 75 roughly follows the path of the escape. Maps of trails may be found at the Fredonia Chamber of Commerce and the Wilson County Historical Society museum.