

A Past, a Future, and a Spoon

by Elizabeth Guerino

The horn spoon, known as “Lvpish Ishtimpa” in Choctaw, is a spoon carved from the horn of a buffalo sometime in the early 1800s. It is brown and uncomplicated in design, with a thin handle that expands into the bowl of the spoon in a relatively even teardrop shape. From the side, the spoon looks like a crescent moon, with no definitive handle. It is a small, unadorned eating utensil, yet it possesses great historical importance and carries with it a simple but profound message not only to Native American tribes, but to me as well.

The horn spoon belonged to sub-chief Hopaii Iskitini, whose name means “Little Leader” or “Little Prophet”. Even though he was small in stature, Hopaii Iskitini was a considerate, courageous, honorable man who was well known for his generosity. He was one of the first Choctaws to be drafted into the U.S. military. He carried the horn spoon all throughout the war of 1812, where he met and fought with Andrew Jackson, who would later become President. Hopaii was a brave warrior and a cunning military strategist, and because of these traits, Andrew Jackson commissioned him as a captain. It was during this war that Hopaii began to be viewed as a prophet and a military leader, hence his name.

After the war, Hopaii fought hard to keep the Choctaws in their native lands of Mississippi. He initially refused to sign the Dancing Rabbit Creek treaty in 1830, a treaty that was written by the federal government in order to take the Choctaw’s native lands of Mississippi and giving them the land in Oklahoma. Hopaii’s influence compelled many other prominent leaders to also initially refuse to sign the treaty. During the third day discussing the treaty, Hopaii led a walkout during the negotiations. Many people would probably believe that Hopaii was simply stubborn and didn’t want to give up his lands, but I think that is not the case. I believe Hopaii felt betrayed. He had fought for

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the U.S. in the war of 1812. On top of that, he fought alongside Andrew Jackson, who was the President now pushing the Dancing Rabbit Creek treaty. Yet even with all that history between the two men, and the service Hopaii paid to the U.S. government, that same government and President were trying to force the Choctaw's out of their land. So I believe that Hopaii's adamant and vocal resistance did not stem so much from stubbornness as a feeling of betrayal.

In the end, the Choctaws were forced to give up their lands in Mississippi, but gained the reservation in Oklahoma. Hopaii and a few older men stayed in Mississippi since they were too aged to embark on what was going to be a long and arduous journey. Hopaii's granddaughter, Sallie Gibson, her Choctaw name Abafukubbee, traveled the long road to Oklahoma, a journey that would later come to be known as the Trail of Tears, because many of the Native Americans died on the difficult journey. "[Sallie's] grandfather, Hopia Iskitina, gave her his old buffalo horn spoon that he carried with him in the War of 1812, as a keepsake and for a safe journey, as she was leaving Mississippi, coming to the 'Wilds of Indian Territory'" (Samuels, 77-78).

This spoon was significant to Sallie Gibson. It was a direct connection to her grandfather and the lands she was leaving behind. It was a tangible reminder of her roots, both her family heritage as well as the land she came from. This horn spoon is significant to me personally in much the same way, since I too am a direct descendant of Hopaii Iskitini; he is my great-great-great grandfather. The spoon represents a direct, physical connection to my heritage. I never had the honor of knowing Hopaii Iskitini in life, and I would have liked to. Yet this simple little horn spoon, and its story, has helped me learn more about Hopaii and has given me a small window into who he was as a Choctaw leader and as a man.

The horn spoon's message is also relevant to all Native Americans today. Hopaii Iskitini chose to give his granddaughter the spoon when she was about to embark on the Trail of Tears for a

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reason: it was a physical reminder of her native ancestral homeland, enabling her to remain connected to that homeland even while she traveled far away. The horn spoon helps us remember that the past shapes who we are as people, and that lesson still applies to us today. Our identity as people is shaped by our history and the traditions that surround us. To lose either one is to lose a part of ourselves. I believe it is crucial for Choctaws to remember who our ancestors were and how they lived, even if we may never play the traditional game of stickball or smoke a peace pipe. Oftentimes the past can teach us and prepare us for the future, so if we lose sight of the past, we may lose sight of opportunities in the future. So while Hopaii gave his horn spoon and its lessons specifically to his granddaughter Sallie, the horn spoon and its reminders have come to us, telling us to not ignore the ways and traditions of our ancestors. We would be foolish if we did ignore our past.

So as a Choctaw, and as a direct descendant of Hopaii Iskitini, I am proud to look back at the traditions of my forefathers and take the lessons they learned and apply them to my life today. Hopaii was a loyal man with the good of his people in mind, and I can only hope I can live up to even half of what he managed in his lifetime. His story has inspired and encouraged me, reminding me that standing up for the lowly can be truly rewarding. So I salute you, Hopaii, and I salute all of the unsung Choctaw warriors who lived and died for their people. May the horn spoon always serve as a reminder that losing sight of our past means losing sight of the future. May we never forget our heritage.

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