

**Delton Cox – Marine Corps Reservist, Educator,
Tribal Council, Constitutional committee member**

Delton Ray Cox served six years in the United States Marine Corps Reserve from 1962 to 1968, enrolling and completing the Fleet Stock Accounting School at Camp Pendleton, California during the summer of 1964.

Delton Cox, ¼ Choctaw, was raised at Summerfield and Spiro, Oklahoma. He is the tenth of eleven children of John and Ora Ida (White) Cox (an original enrollee of the Choctaw Nation). He is the youngest grandson of Buck and Angeline (Mitchell) White.

Cox began preparing early for a life of service. After graduating from Leflore High School in 1961, he borrowed \$300 from the NDEA program to enroll in Eastern Oklahoma A&M College. While there, he was active in the Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO) and Eastern's Indian Club, being elected as their Vice-President and then as their President. He graduated with an associate degree in 1963.

Furthering his education, Cox next attended Southeastern Oklahoma State College, graduating with a Bachelor's Degree of Education in 1965. He continued his education at Pennsylvania State University, earning a Masters of Education in Administration degree in 1971. Next he completed all of the coursework, got his dissertation topic approved, and passed the oral and written exams for a Ph.D. in 1972 before running out of funds and running out of time away from his job. He attended Mississippi State University during the summer months at night, earning an Ed.S. Degree in 1978. The courses for his Principal's certification were taken at Northeastern State University and the courses for his Superintendent's certification were taken at OSU on the Tulsa Campus.

He married Deloris Thompson Cox in 1970. She is from the Tucker Community south of Philadelphia, Mississippi, enrolled as 4/4 Choctaw with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. They have two grown sons and four grandchildren.

Cox has had a tremendous commitment to education, spending 32 years working in that field from 1965-1997. At 21 years of age, he served as the Social Studies teacher and coach at Arkoma from 1965-1966. He then went to Buffalo Valley as their Social Studies teacher and coach for one month before being recruited by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Education to teach Social Studies at Ft. Sill Indian School in Lawton for a \$2,000 increase in pay. While there he volunteered to coach girls softball.

Cox was recruited in 1967 to teach on the Choctaw Reservation at Choctaw Central High School near Philadelphia, Mississippi. He took a lateral transfer in December and moved to Mississippi. After getting married in 1970, he moved back to Ft. Sill Indian School, taking the job as Guidance Counselor (Dormitory Living) in charge of the Boys Dorm. Next, BIA Education recruited him to move to Haskell in Lawrence, Kansas to learn how to convert a Vocational Technical School to a Jr. College. He was on the payroll two years there before accepting the Education Planner position on the MBCI Reservation.

Due to the declining health of his mother in Oklahoma, Cox resigned and moved to be close to her. He got a job with Kiamichi Vo-Tech School District as their Indian Field Representative for one year. He next accepted the BIA Education job at Jones Academy (a peripheral dormitory) as their Guidance Counselor. Eight years later he was promoted to the Administrator position, which he held for three years before accepting a lateral transfer to the BIA Muskogee Area

Office of Indian Education for six years. When that office was transferred to Oklahoma City he accepted the school superintendent position at Sequoyah and went to work for the Cherokee Nation. Three years went by and then Chief Wilma Mankiller of the Cherokee Nation announced that she was retiring due to her health. Cox was asked to apply for the BIA Education principal's job at Riverside Indian School at Anadarko. He did and was accepted by the school board, who wanted someone with a superintendent's certification. Cox worked there for three years before taking retirement, a reduction in annuity, and moved back to eastern Oklahoma at 53 years of age.

After moving back to Oklahoma, Cox took a position at Spiro Public School teaching social studies and economics for one semester. Chief Greg Pyle and Assistant Chief Mike Bailey of the Choctaw Nation asked Cox to work for the Choctaw Nation as the Tribal Treasurer. He accepted the position in December of 1997 and stayed until 2001, when he decided to run for the Tribal Councilman position of the Fourth District of the Choctaw Nation.

Cox was unopposed in 2001 for Council. He served in that position for 20 years, being elected five times to four-year terms. He was also elected by his peers on the Tribal Council ten consecutive years as their Speaker. He decided in 2021 that he should step down and not run again.

When asked what the duties of the Choctaw Council were, former Speaker Delton Cox replied, "This is stated in the Constitution - the Tribal Council passes laws and funds tribal programs. Budgets come to the Council to approve or disapprove them. The Council also has the responsibility of properties of the Choctaw Nation – real property and equipment. As the Legislative Branch of the Choctaw Nation, it also has a fiduciary responsibility for the tribe's budget."

During his 20 years as Councilman, Cox saw great expansion and thousands of new employees in the Choctaw Nation, and the acquisition of over 90,000 acres of new tribal land. In District 4 at Pocola, he saw a Hotel/Casino, new Travel Plaza with a Casino 2 and Snack Bar. In the Poteau area, Cox saw expansions to the Rubin White Health Clinic and Lois White Burton Refill Center, creation of a Wellness Center and Employee Clinic; a Food Distribution Store; Recycling Center; an expansion of the Community Center; a new Head Start/Child Care Center; and a large warehouse. In Spiro, a new Community Center was built for the Tribal people living in that area from both Districts 4 and 5.

Cox is proud that District 4 had one of the tribe's Chili's franchise restaurants located in Poteau. He said over 80 new Affordable Rental and LEAP Homes were built in his area during his time as Councilman, with more homes continuing to be built. He says this progress adds possibility of improved lifestyles of Choctaws in the area.

When asked about the expansion of the judicial system from a Constitutional Court to a more robust system, Cox took the explanation back to the Choctaw Constitution.

"In the past, our leader, the Chief of the Choctaw Nation, was appointed by the President. We did not have a functioning Tribal government after statehood in 1907." Cox talked about a time in Choctaw history just before statehood. We went through an allotment period when some people wanted to abolish the Tribal government and give so much land to each tribal member and open the remainder of the land up for white settlers. Not everyone was in agreement with allotment – one group even wanted to take the Choctaw Nation into Mexico. That group was called the Snake Choctaws. One of their leaders was Jacob Jackson, who graduated from a

college back East and who had been defeated by Wilson N. Jones in the 1894 election for Chief. Moving the Choctaw Nation to Mexico did not happen. After Choctaw Nation 'ceased to exist' – although we were not officially dissolved – the Federal Government appointed people as Chief who spoke for the Choctaw people."

Cox said, "In 1970, President Richard Nixon issued a new American Indian policy and Congress later passed the Self-Determination Act. The last of the appointed Chiefs, Harry J.W. Belvin from Hugo, set up 12 County Councils in the Choctaw Nation that met quarterly with the Chief to advise him on tribal affairs. LeFlore and McCurtain Counties were divided into north and south. Each County Council elected their officials which were President, Vice-President, Secretary-Treasurer, and Chaplain. We have always had Chaplains because Choctaws are religious with a belief in God the Creator. God gives us guidance in what we do." Cox was living in Wilburton and did not attend the Chief's quarterly meeting in 1976 but was elected the Secretary-Treasurer of the Latimer County of Choctaws.

"The Self-Determination Act encourages tribes to have more say in their affairs. The need to have a Tribal Constitution began to be a point of discussion. There was a push for a new Constitution. That would be the basis to establish the Choctaw Nation government," said Cox.

"The 12 County Councils of Choctaws met as a whole at Tuskahoma with about 36 of the 48 elected County Council officials attending," said Cox. These officials elected five people to represent the whole, with Delton Cox being one of them. Cox said, "We started meeting in individuals' homes and in public buildings in various counties and started making some progress."

Cox said, "The Chief at that time was Hollis Roberts. He began to recognize only the presidents of the County Councils. Those of us who were not presidents had no voice except through our local county council president. By this time, another group of Choctaws had started suing for the recognition of the 1860 Constitution." The president of the Latimer County Council of Choctaws, Lillian Sullivan, asked Cox to attend a meeting the Chief had called in McAlester at the Choctaw Health Clinic to discuss a Choctaw constitution. Cox went, finding only about 12 people were in attendance, including Chief Roberts, the Tribal attorney and a Secretary. Not all of the county council presidents attended. Cox said, "At that meeting, we put together a constitution in one night for the entire tribe."

Cox said, "This was the 1979 Constitution, put together in one evening by about a dozen people. It was next put to a vote of the Choctaw people. They approved it. The choice for the Choctaws was either approve it, or keep things as they had been. According to that constitution, there were twelve council members from inside the Choctaw Nation and three at-large council members from outside the Nation."

Cox said, "In the meantime, the lawsuit for the re-establishment of the 1860 Constitution continued. It went all the way to Washington, D.C. in arbitration. The Federal Court ordered that the 1860 and 1979 Constitutions be merged, and a committee was set up to do that. There had been a disagreement within the plaintiff group so there was to be two committee members from that group, two for the tribal defendants appointed by the Chief, two neutral members, and a chief arbitrator/chairperson (Fred Ragsdale – a lawyer from the New Mexico University Law School)." The two neutral members approved by the other committee members were Richard Fitzgerald, a retired Choctaw living in Tulsa, and the other neutral member selected was Dalton Cox.

"We had heated discussions on what was needed, and finally it was put to a vote by the Choctaw voters who approved it. We met in the evening hours weekly as needed at the BIA Agency Conference Room in Talihina with guards at the entrance and exit doors. After a few weeks, a finished document was submitted to the Secretary of the Interior, who approved it in June 1983. Assistant Secretary John Fritz signed it," said Cox.

"The 1860 Constitution was about the fifth constitution of the Choctaw Nation. According to Dr. Angie Debo, a well-known historian, there was a Constitutional Convention in Skullyville in 1857 but the Choctaws in the south of the Choctaw Nation did not like it since it was patterned after the States' form of government with a Governor instead of Chief. Some historians say that the seal is the only thing from the Skullyville Convention that survived. The Choctaws in the southern part of the Choctaw Nation had a convention at Doaksville and developed a constitution patterned after the United States Constitution with three branches of government. We had a lot of precedents to consider," said Cox.

"As far as the Judicial Branch, we had some difficulty in arriving at an agreement. We finally agreed that the judicial responsibility of the Constitutional Court was to decide issues between the Legislative and Executive branches," Cox said. "One of the three judges must be a licensed attorney and at least two of the judges must be members of the Choctaw Nation. The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Court was getting bogged down with the number of cases coming up. As we grew, there were numerous cases coming up to the CFR Court."

Cox said, "The Choctaw Nation Court of General Jurisdiction was established in 2009 to unite and consolidate the Nation's courts. Replacing the former CFR Court of Indian Offenses, the Court of General Jurisdiction operates through the Appellate Division and the District Courts of the Choctaw Nation. The Court of General Jurisdiction includes the District Court and Court of Appeals, and the highest level court, the Constitutional Court."

Cox talked about the importance of a strong judicial system. "It reaffirms our sovereignty. Sovereignty is something we have to protect within the Choctaw Nation. Yes, the Federal Government has control over us to a great degree, but our sovereignty as a sovereign nation of people has to be protected. We have to set up a system that enhances that concept.

"Our growth in the future as a Choctaw people will be enhanced by this court system, more so than with two different systems. Now we can take care of much of our business in our own court system. Choctaw Nation IS a sovereign nation."

Cox said, "Right now, the Choctaw Nation is better off, money-wise, than we have ever been. About the year 2000, we really got off the ground. We are one of the entities involved in all of the southeastern Oklahoma counties and towns. We are a power that is seen economically. A phrase on our Choctaw car tag is appropriate, "Chata Sia Hoke!" I AM Choctaw!

Some historians have noted that in battles the proudest boast of Choctaw warriors was just that, **Chata Sia Hoke!**