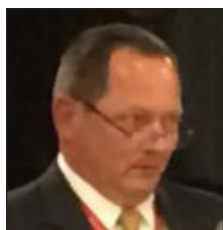




Hon. Andrew Adams III Chief Justice, Muscogee (Creek) Nation Supreme Court

by Jasen Chadwick



Jasen Chadwick serves as the staff attorney for the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Supreme Court. He is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and a U.S. Army veteran. Chadwick can be reached at jchadwick@mcnsupremecourt.com. © 2016 Jasen Chadwick. All rights reserved.

When asked about the legacy of his great-great grandfather, current Chief Justice Andrew Adams III remarked, “In retrospect, my great-great-grandfather led the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Supreme Court at the beginning of one of the most challenging periods in Muscogee (Creek) Nation history.” The elder Adams was born in the mid-19th century in the heart of Indian Territory near modern-day Muskogee, Okla.¹ He was considered one of the brightest lawyers among the Muscogee people and served as a tribal legislator for almost 30 years prior to being selected for the tribal judiciary in December 1895.²

By then, the federal Indian policy of allotment was already underway in most of the United States, and the federal government would within three years enact legislation that ultimately resulted in allotment of tribally held treaty lands in Indian Territory and attempted to dissolve the governments of the “Five Civilized Tribes.”³ While working to preserve Muscogee Nation sovereignty almost 120 years ago, it is unlikely that then-Chief Justice Adams could have fathomed the degree to which the example he set would later influence his great-great-grandson.

Andrew Adams III was born and raised in Detroit. He decided during high school that he wanted to pursue a career in which he could positively affect the lives of Indian people and tribes. “In high school, I started to consider ultimately going to law school, but I veered away from law once I started at the University of Michigan,” he said. “I was very active in the Indian community in Michigan, serving as co-chair for the Native American Students Association, numerous years on the powwow committee, chairman of the board for American Indian Health and Family Services of Southeastern Michigan, and drum keeper for the Tree Town Singers.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree with a double major in English and history in 1996 and a master’s degree in American culture in 1999, Adams found a



renewed interest in attending law school. “While doing graduate work in the University of Michigan’s American culture program, it seemed I was continually exposed to the fact that no other ethnic group of U.S. citizens has an entire title of the U.S. Code dedicated to them,” he said. “Based on that fact, I thought that the best way for me to achieve my vision of helping Indian people and tribes was to become an attorney well versed in those laws by going to law school.”

Drawn by its specialized Indian law program and its commitment to community, Adams began law school at the University of Wisconsin in 2003. During law school, his leadership within the Native American community and Native American student organizations continued and ultimately led to his election to the Executive Board of the National Native American Law Students Association as treasurer. Adams graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 2006 and immediately began realizing his vision.

Following law school, Adams served as an in-house tribal attorney for the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin. In this role, he was responsible for

representing a wide range of St. Croix tribal interests, including tribal sovereignty, children, elders, cultural integrity, land base, economic development, and natural resources. Only a year later, Adams was elevated to the role of general counsel for the St. Croix Chippewa. “One of the proudest moments of my legal career was when the St. Croix Chippewa Tribal Council put their trust in me to serve as their head legal officer,” he recalls. “I took my responsibility as an advocate for the St. Croix Chippewa very seriously, because along with the position of general counsel came the monumental task of identifying and assessing all of the legal challenges that faced the St. Croix. It was an honor.”

In 2010, Adams joined the Jacobson Law Group in St. Paul, Minn., as an associate attorney, regularly advising clients on a range of legal matters involving federal Indian law. Three years later, he became a founding member of Hogen Adams PLLC in St. Paul, where today he continues to provide clients with expertise in federal Indian law, tribal constitutional law, tribal governance, gaming law, complex financial transactions, tribal and individual business and taxation law, employment law, government relations, and treaty hunting, fishing, and gathering law.

In addition to providing lectures on Indian law issues at seminars and conferences nationally, Chief Justice Adams is frequently invited to speak to Native American student groups. When asked by groups of law students to provide advice for success, he advises students to “always work hard, but refuse to compromise your ethics. Hold on to them. It’s not impossible to be both a good lawyer and a good person. Always be humble and demonstrate humility, because while it’s important to be a good lawyer, it will never be more important than being a good person.” He also emphasizes to students the importance of maintaining their culture and tradition.

Chief Justice Adams is a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and from the Wind Clan. He is a member of the Tallahassee Wvkokaye Ceremonial Grounds, which is a short distance from the area where his great-great-grandfather was born. Chief Justice Adams returns to the Tallahassee Wvkokaye Ceremonial Grounds every year to attend the annual Green Corn Ceremony, which is a celebration of the traditional Muscogee New Year. “I always look forward to participating in Green Corn each year,” he said. “It really is an opportunity for me to recharge my batteries by participating in the ceremonial traditions of my people.”

In addition to serving as the chief justice of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Supreme Court, he also serves as chief justice of the Santee Sioux Nation of Nebraska and as an appellate judge for the Court of Appeals of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians. In spite of his law practice and judicial responsibilities, he continues to find additional ways to serve the Indian law and Native American communities. Chief Justice Adams is the immediate past chairman of the FBA Indian Law Section, and he previously served as a board member of the Minnesota American Indian Bar

Association and as a board member for the State Bar of Wisconsin Indian Law Section. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for the American Indian Cancer Foundation, the Minnesota American Indian Chamber of Commerce, the Native American Community Development Institute, and the Tiwahe Foundation.

Chief Justice Adams’ greatest passion is his family. He and his wife, Danielle DeLong, met while in college as leaders of separate Native American student groups. “She was head of the Native Studies organization at Eastern Michigan University, and I was co-chair of the Native American Students Association at the University of Michigan,” he recalled. “We’ve been married for over 16 years now, and not a day goes by that I’m not thankful for it.” Their children—Jennifer, Andrew IV, and Benjamin—range in age from 8 to 13. The Adamses also have a 10-year-old foster son, Chris. “My family is everything to me,” said Adams. “They’re what gets me up and gets me going each day.” When he isn’t working, Chief Justice Adams enjoys spending time with his wife and children, playing golf, watching football, being outdoors, and attending stomp dances and powwows.

Today, Chief Justice Adams reflects almost daily on the challenges faced by his great-great-grandfather more than a century ago and believes he would be proud of the Muscogee Nation court system today. “Between our two trial court judges and six supreme court justices, we’ve collectively accumulated over 200 years of legal experience,” said Chief Justice Adams. “This collective wealth of knowledge and experience encompasses civil, criminal, and family matters as both attorney-advocates and judges in tribal, state, and federal courts. Judges Greg Bigler and John Cripps and justices George Thompson, Leah Harjo-Ware, Kathy Supernaw, Montie Deer, and Richard Lerblance provide outstanding judicial services to the Muscogee people that is at least as good as our state and federal counterparts.”

“Tribal courts have existed for centuries and predate federal and state courts,” he added. “Unlike other judiciary members, the responsibility of a tribal judge doesn’t end with deciding legal disputes. We have an obligation to be ambassadors to help disprove and overcome the existing misperception that tribal court judges are uneducated and inexperienced and that tribal courts are inherently biased and necessarily less objective than state and federal courts. Such misperceptions are simply inaccurate.”

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Chief Justice Adams was recently selected to lead the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Supreme Court for a third consecutive one-year term. “We’re proud of the progress made in the Nation’s judicial branch over the last 30 years,” he said. “Legal systems and courts are critical components to any legitimate sovereign government; however, the exercise of tribal jurisdiction today is increasingly scrutinized. Preservation of tribal sovereignty demands that tribal courts vigilantly seek jurisprudential approaches that are both firmly grounded in tribal law and informed by a consideration of how the decision will be perceived by political forces external to the tribe.” ☉

Endnotes

¹Harry F. and Edward S. O’Beirne, *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators, and Leading Men*, (1898), ACCESSGENEALOGY.COM, www.accessgenealogy.com/native/biographical-sketch-of-thomas-j-adams.htm (last accessed Dec. 18, 2015).

²*Id.*

³General Allotment Act, Feb. 8, 1887, 24 Stat. 388.

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