

October 18, 1989

Re: Cultural Exchange

Dear Friends:

I am writing this report of the "Cherokee Religious and Cultural Exchange Project" in the form of a personal letter to you. As you know, the majority of the Cherokee people were driven out of their homeland and holy land in 1838-39 to what is now Oklahoma. Their homes were looted and burned; they were rounded up by the American army and held in concentration camps during the hot summer months of 1838. Disease took a heavy toll in these camps. Finally, detachments of Cherokees started over the Trail of Tears for the Indian Territory in the autumn of 1838, arriving there in the late winter of 1839. Most Cherokees walked that cold trail already sick and with hardly enough clothing to cover themselves. Several thousand were buried by the side of "the path where they cried", primarily older people and children. They arrived in the Indian Territory destitute, dispirited, and disoriented.

The Cherokees had left their homes and their holy places far behind them. They had come to a strange land with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The death of over ¼ of their loved ones was a heavy weight on them. But they had one thing to sustain them. They carried the Fire, the Cherokee religion, in their hearts; and that Fire never went out. Cherokees in the Indian Territory worshiped in secret for some sixty years. Then in 1902, Redbird Smith, the great Cherokee religious leader and teacher, laid down a Fire, made a Fireplace, near his home. In a couple of years there were over twenty Fires in the Cherokee Nation. The old Cherokee (Keetoowah) religion became public once again, replete with ceremonial grounds, priesthoods, and ceremonies.

Some Cherokees in the North Carolina part of the old Cherokee country avoided the Removal. Some were living outside the borders of the old Cherokee Nation in American territory and others fled to the mountains to avoid the troops. They suffered greatly but they did not experience the great loss of life and the resultant social chaos as did their countrymen who were driven west. After the removal they maintained two Fireplaces - one near Cherokee and one in the Snowbird settlement, some forty miles west of modern Cherokee. The Fire at Cherokee went out in 1870. The one in Snowbird lasted a few years longer and their seven-sided dance house (called a Town House in the records) was still standing until World War I. North Carolina Cherokees still continued their dances and ceremonies, however. They would hold dances at individual homes or, in the case of the Ball-play dance and the Green Corn Ceremony, at special grounds. The last reservation-wide Green Corn Ceremony, in which all the townships participated, was held at Big Cove in the early 1900s. Big Cove held their last Green Corn Ceremony in 1937, and all Cherokee ceremonies ceased with the death of Will West Long of Big Cove in the mid-1940s.

Modernly, the old Cherokee religion in North Carolina has consisted only of the use of Cherokee spiritual medicine and a few family practices in the home. North Carolina Cherokees, like Oklahoma Cherokees, did develop a genuine native Christianity in the 1800s. Cherokee Baptist churches in North Carolina were genuine Cherokee institutions. But eastern Cherokee churches have been simply standard southern Protestant churches for some thirty years now. Further, the loss of the Cherokee language among younger Cherokees recently is frightening. Cherokees in North

Carolina have almost nothing of their own left in these days. More, those Cherokees referred to as full bloods, some of 40% of the population there, have been denigrated, looked down on, ignored, discounted, sneered at, and excluded by the majority of the rest of the reservation population for some years now. Their morale is low and the fear of social and cultural extinction is ever present. (Many of you reading this report understand the situation better than I do.)

The full blood Cherokees in North Carolina have been wanting a Fire for some time now. When I lived in Cherokee in 1957-58 people there were expressing such a desire then. In those times I was poor, had small children, and little influence so I was unable to help them. In 1977 some of the full-blooded Cherokees decided to lay a Fire, make a Fireplace. They formed a committee made up of prestigious and knowledgeable elders, plus some younger "hard chargers." They contacted me for help. I was able to let them have a thousand dollars (all my savings) for expenses - cost of gasoline to attend meetings, land purchase for a ceremonial ground, material for a seven-sided dance house, etc. Unfortunately, I was not able to go to North Carolina and help them in their efforts. But I was both working and broke that summer. I deeply regret that I didn't find some way to go down there. As some of you know, I have had considerable experience organizing Indian efforts, particularly religious events, and meetings. In any case, their effort collapsed, for various and valid reasons. They did manage to have one stomp dance, but I think that they felt very discouraged. I was discouraged because they were discouraged; because I thought the people there badly needed a Fire; and because it was disgraceful for all Cherokees that there was not one Fire in all of the Cherokee Holy land, especially in the area of the Qualla reservation which is virtually at the foot of the holy mountain where God gave Cherokees the Seven Clan Law.

Then in the autumn of 1988 two young men in Oklahoma evidenced a desire to revive the old Cherokee war organization. Formerly, each Cherokee settlement had had a captain and a company which protected the people there, managed co-operative gardening and charity work, and doubled in the old days as the local stick ball team. This organization died out in the early 1900s in Oklahoma, although co-operative gardening lasted until the 1930s. I suggested to them that they start their own ceremonial grounds, a Red Fire, and go to North Carolina to learn the special eagle dances that were once the property of the warriors. I staked them to \$500 and prevailed on a boyhood friend now head medicine man of Redbird Fire, Gokski Smith, to go to North Carolina with them.

Smith was appalled at the situation in North Carolina. When he returned to Oklahoma he phoned me. He said that he would like to take a group of people from Redbird Fire, the original Fire established by Redbird Smith, to North Carolina to meet with Cherokees there so as to give them a little hope that all was not lost for the Cherokees. Smith had asked me over a year previously to make copies of the Cherokee wampum belts, the major vehicle used to interpret the Cherokee Law. I was engaged in that endeavor so suggested a plan to him. I suggested that the people at Big Cove put on a Green Corn Ceremony in August of '89 and at that time a party of Redbird Fire Cherokees could come to North Carolina and explain the Seven Clan Law embodied in the wampum belts. Some of you know that the Green Corn Ceremony, the major Cherokee religious service, was lost to Oklahoma Cherokees during Removal times. However, North Carolina Cherokees still know the Green Corn songs and dances. I suggested to Smith that he go to North Carolina a month or six weeks before the August meeting and help the elders there with any organizing problems. I thought of this plan as a cultural exchange between Oklahoma and North

Carolina - Oklahoma Cherokees learning about the Green Corn Ceremony and North Carolina people learning about the Cherokee Law. Smith agreed to these notions with perhaps establishing a Fire in North Carolina later on In January of '89 I wrote to the son of an old friend of mine, Reuben Teesateskee, a member of the North Carolina Cherokee Council representing Big Cove township, outlining Smith's and my plan. I asked him to talk around to Big Cove people to see if they approved of this idea. I understand that at least some of the Big Cove people were enthusiastic about this plan. And in April Teesateskee came to Oklahoma and conferred with Hickory Starr, chief of Redbird Fire, and several other Redbird priestly officials. Shortly after this I contacted Jerry Wilkinson, of the National Indian Youth Council, and asked him if N.I.Y.C. would "hold" the funds for this project. Then I began to contact all of you by 'phone and person-to-person, asking for contributions. You all were most generous, and I know the low salary of academics and church people. Over the months I was able to raise about \$4,700. (I had asked an educated and influential member of Redbird Fire to raise \$2,000, but that did not materialize. Due to your generosity, however, we did not need the \$2,000.)

In June, Redbird Fire sent two official medicine makers to North Carolina - Gokski Smith, the head medicine man of Redbird Fire, and Pat Moss, medicine man from the Four Mothers' Fire - to assess the commitment of the Big Cove people to the project. They reported back to Redbird that the Big Cove people were enthusiastic. However, I sensed that the thinking of both Big Cove and Redbird was changing. Both groups were beginning to want to see a Fire in North Carolina as soon as possible, more than simply a common meeting and exchange of cultural knowledge. In August, Walker Calhoun, the head singer and ceremonialist at Big Cove, came to Oklahoma to confer with Chief Hickory Starr. They decided that the time was ripe for a Fire in North Carolina. Once again, two medicine men from Oklahoma traveled to North Carolina to assess the situation. The last Green Corn Ceremony was held in 1937 on the land of a full blood Cherokee woman. Her father had told her to hold on to that piece of land for there would be a "stomp ground," a Fire, there one day. When she met the Redbird medicine men she said that her father's prediction was fulfilled, and donated this valuable piece of bottom land for the Fire.

Redbird Fire holds its main ceremony and meeting in early September. A party traveled from Big Cove for this meeting. After conferring, worship ping, and making medicine together the lighting of the Fire in Big Cove was set for Friday, September 29th. Gokski Smith, Red bird's head medicine man, went a week beforehand on the 23rd to Big Cove in order to help Big Cove people prepare the grounds, to fast, and to spiritually prepare for the lighting of the Fire. On Thursday the 28th thirty-six people in six cars and vans left Oklahoma for Big Cove; most of the officials of Redbird Fire along with some good song leaders and shell-shakers. That day a very hard rain commenced that covered the whole area of the middle South. It continued to Sunday night. Nevertheless, Fire was laid just before dawn of the 29th. Red bird Fire officials are more than satisfied with the ceremony of the laying of Fire. The grounds have a strong spiritual aura and the ceremony went well. Although I cannot put down the details in writing here, I can tell you that Redbird medicine men laid the strongest Fire I have ever heard of being laid, incredibly powerful medicine was used in the Fire lighting. Big Cove is in good hands spiritually.

Redbird people had hoped to camp on the grounds and to do their cooking in their camps. However, the hard rain made this impossible. They had to stay in motels and eat in local restaurants during the visit. I am afraid they spent quite a lot of money out of their own pockets, far more than I

had allotted them. Their main disappointment, however, was the fact that they were unable to socialize with Big Cove people in camps at the Fireplace, the stomp grounds. Saturday night a stomp dance was held at the Fire in the driving rain. The grounds were a sea of mud. In spite of all, some 150 local people came to the dance. On Sunday, Redbird Fire people started back to Oklahoma feeling good about a job well done and with a strong sense of spiritual fulfillment. After 150 years they had brought the Fire back to the “old country,” to the Cherokee Holy Land. The Cherokee prophecies in Oklahoma say that some day the Cherokee trail will turn east again, that we will return to our old country. Perhaps we have started that journey.

North Carolina Cherokees feel new hope, to say the least. That 150 people attended the stomp dance on Saturday night in the driving rain speaks for it. Their Fire now has a fire keeper and a head medicine man. They will select the rest of their priestly officials over the next year or so. Next summer Big Cove is planning a four day ceremony in mid-August at their new Fire. They have asked Redbird Fire Cherokees to return for this “birthday” celebration of their Fire. I am offering my services in helping them organize their celebration. If they accept I will be spending next summer in North Carolina.

I cannot thank you for the Big Cove people or for Redbird Fire. But there are few things I have wanted more in my life than to see a Fire again in North Carolina. Your contribution has made that life-long dream a reality. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, my friends. God bless you!

Sincerely,

Robert K. Thomas

RKT:sd