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Childhood

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Chapter 3 Childhood

What I would like to do in this chapter is to say something about my life as youngster in a Cherokee community in the hills of eastern Oklahoma, in order to give the reader a "feel" for the kind of life an Indian youngster leads. I then later in the chapter I can outline some of the changes which have taken place in that style of life. But I would like to say at this point that in broad outline the quality of life of Indian youngsters today in rural Indian communities is very much like my experience as a youngster.

One of my first memories is "riding" on my grandmother's back. When my grandmother worked in the garden or walked to the local store she usually carried me in a skin-like arrangement on her back, facing forward. Most Indian tribes carried their babies on their backs in cradleboards, facing backward, but the Cherokee carried the children facing forward. I can remember riding on her back until I was almost school age. My legs were dangling down past her waist and jumping up and down like I was riding a horse. One time one of my grandmother's white friends asked her, "Why is it that the Cherokees carry the baby facing forward?" My grandmother replied, "the Cherokees, we already know where we've been, we want to see where we are going."

We lived in a log house along a creek in the wooded hills of eastern Oklahoma. My household consisted of my grandparents and my second mother (my mother's sister) and myself. It is the Cherokee custom for the grandparents to take a major part in the care of children. My father had died when I was small and my mother was working away in ~ distant city. I was an "only child". I can remember play by myself out under a shade tree in the yard or behind the house down the hill among some big rocks. But most of the time, I played with relatives my own age. In fact, nearly all the people I saw in my early life were relatives. Within a three or four mile radius there we're perhaps twenty Indian households. All the people in these households were either blood relatives or related by marriage, and we were always visiting back and forth to each other's houses. We, also, went on visits as much as possible to those relatives who lived in other small Indian communities nearby. I remember I had an uncle, my mother's brother (in the English terminology, my mother's first cousin), of whom I was very fond. My grandfather would take me on horseback to his home in another Indian community some ten miles away for long extended visits. My grandmother had a mother and two sisters who lived in another Indian community some seven miles distant and we went there on visits. For these visits the whole family would go in a spring wagon, lurching over the rough country roads of eastern Oklahoma. But we were always visiting even within our community. Most times this was simply dropping in and out of relative's houses. Sometimes visits were more formal.

A mile away my grandfather's oldest brother lived with his wife and two daughters, their husbands and children, and his mother, my great-grandmother. Many times on Sunday we would walk over to his house for Sunday dinner. I remember there used to be 30 people fed at two tables on those visits. At other times my grandfather's youngest brother, who was somewhat of a gay blade and lived in a nearby town, would drive out in his horse and cart and pick me up and take me to visit my great-mother at my other grandfather's (great uncle) house. I was the first

of her great-grand children and she was very fond of me, and of course, let me do whatever I wanted. So that nearly everyone I played with or visited were relatives.

In our community, there were several white families, and although we were not close families, we were "neighborly" and would, of course, help them out in times of crisis such as sickness or death. Sometimes during the year we traded labor with them. My family had lived in this area of eastern Oklahoma since the 1830's, from the time we were driven out of our "old country" in the mountain sections of Georgia and North Carolina into what was then the Indian Territory. It was much like our "old country" and we had lived long enough in this region that we loved it as if we had been there from the beginning of time. Our land and our relatives were familiar and loved and my life took place in those days in this familiar and loved environment of my relatives and my land.

Not all of my associations were simply play and visits. I worked and I learned as well. My relatives raised me to be a good Cherokee simply by being who they were. Further, they educated me in a more formal sense of the word. Many times I didn't even realize that I was learning. For instance, our house was full of older Indian men on many nights who would tell the stories of the creation, of the beginning of the world and ponder their meaning; and discuss omens and prophecies of the future. Many times they would sit around the kitchen table while I was playing on the floor. I am sure that I absorbed much of their knowledge indirectly. Other times they would sit around the fireplace discussing such subjects far into the night and I can remember dropping off to sleep, hearing their conversation as I went to sleep.

My grandfather was not a Christian but he had a good friend who was a prominent Cherokee Baptist preacher and an Indian style curer. He would visit my grandfather, particularly in warm weather, and they would sit out on the porch or under the shade tree and discuss the Bible, the symbolism of the Cherokee wampum belts, and so forth. I was always near my grandfather in those times and remember those conversations well. Other times my grandfather would take me on short trips. My grandfather was a constable in a local small town nearby. Sometimes he had to take trips on official business and sometimes he would travel about horse-trading. He would saddle up his horse and put a pillow back of his saddle and I would ride behind him. As we traveled the road he would tell no stories. As we approached points in our journey he would tell me of events that happened there when he was a child, or perhaps he would tell me an older story that older men had told him when he was small. The eastern Oklahoma landscape, thus, became live for me in terms of its meanings and its history. My roots were deep and my being fixed in that soil.

Other times my education in the Cherokee mode was more formal. My "uncle" that I mentioned who lived in a community some 10 miles away was my mentor and teacher of the ways of the wild. He taught me to hunt, to fish, to trap, to shoot, to do all those things a young Cherokee male must be skilled at. One of my first memories was of tagging along after him when he was hunting and later of carrying his gun. Other times I hunted with older boys, relatives, teenage boys back in my home community. I had father (an uncle in English thought) who taught me how to run. I was interested in learning how to run and I went to him with this specific request. I remember I took him a cigar and asked him if he would teach me to run, since he was well known as a fine runner. I must say I found training hard, but in the end, well worth

it. Some men taught their children how to read in the Cherokee language. We are very proud of our writing system, developed by our great genius, Sequoyah. But most of us were not interested in reading at that stage of our lives. Most Cherokees learn to read in Cherokee in their thirties when they want to read the Bible, old Cherokee laws, curing prayers, or older Cherokee literature.

As you can see from reading over this narrative so far, I spent a lot of time outside of my household. In fact, most of the children of our community didn't "belong" to simply a single father and mother. They belonged to the whole kin group. No one "owned" a Cherokee child and to some extent we simply "floated" from house to house, from relative to relative. As I mentioned earlier, I would go on extended visits to live with my uncle in another community and in the summer I would stay weeks with my grandmother's sister, who lived 10 miles away.

In those days, the Cherokees lived off the land and I was as much a part of the activity of wresting a living from the land as an adult. In the spring, the ladies would put in large gardens and the garden among Cherokees, like the house, is the domain of the women. Nevertheless, we would all come to help break the ground and plant. Everyone in the community would assemble at that one home and help put in the garden and the next day go to the next home and help put in the garden there. The women would cook sumptuous meals trying to outdo one another for this work group, made up of the whole community; and we made this planting a time of enjoyment, almost a party. During the rest of the summer the ladies in the household or perhaps ladies who lived close to one another, relatives, would work the gardens together. Then in the fall we would all assemble once again for the harvest and go from house to house harvesting the gardens. After the harvest small groups of women would assemble at one another's house to help preserve the food. Later, we would have a "corn shucking", along with square dance that night.

I was an accomplished hunter by the age of twelve and had my own rifle. And when I was given three shells for my rifle I was expected to bring back three squirrels, three birds, three rabbits, or the like. Groups of younger children and women gathered wild foods from early spring to late fall - wild greens in the springtime, berries in the summer, nuts and persimmons and wild grapes in the fall. And this gardening, hunting, and gathering were the mainstay of our life. Cherokee men, particularly young men, teenagers, and even children spend great deal of time hunting all through the year but particularly in the fall and winter. Sometimes this hunting was done alone or perhaps several teenage brothers with their younger brothers "tagging" along. Fishing followed the same pattern although the major time of fishing was, of course, in warm weather. A few Cherokees in other areas did "cash crop" farming, raised and sold corn or cotton; but that wasn't our style around home. We did not hunt because we liked to kill. We hunted in order to eat. The old people told us that it was God's plan that the Cherokees should live off the wild game. But we thought everything had a right to exist unmolested. We killed animals and cut down trees because we needed to eat and to keep warm. We pulled up plants to eat or to use in curing. We did "landscape" our yards. Some Indian doctors put pinch of tobacco in the hole where they pull up an herb, a thanks and a replacement. Sometimes we prayed for success before a hunt and for forgiveness afterwards. We knew that it was God's plan that living things in this world should feed one another and respect one another.

Large game was not as plentiful in our area as it once had been. Some years my grandfather and some of our family would go back to a particularly good hunting and fishing area of the Appalachians where we had distant relatives. We would live in a hunting camp there during November and part of December, and return laden with meat. Others would go to the Kiamichi Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma, not too far distant, for deer and bear. Cherokees in other areas did not hunt as extensively as we did in our community nor travel as far on hunting trips. My grandfather kept hogs which we killed in the fall and my grandmother kept chickens which we used for eggs and frying chickens. In May I carefully watched each growing chicken to see if it was big enough to fry, and from the middle of June to the middle of July it seemed we ate nothing but frying chickens. A few households in our communities kept cows but, by and large, Indians are not fond of milk and some households did not even keep hogs (in the old days hogs had run wild) or chickens but tended to eat the meat of wild game entirely.

In the old days of the Indian territory many Cherokees owned cattle but there were very few Indian Cattlemen when I was growing up possibly because we didn't have enough land then. Cherokees are fond of barbecued beef and somehow we managed to get a beef or two for the public gatherings, but usually we ate little beef. All through the process of making a living, everyone from the oldest to the youngest was involved and there was a great deal of sharing of goods and labor. We had very little money in those days or very little need for money. There was a small country store in the vicinity but we bought very little more than needles, thread, salt, coffee, spices, sometimes sugar, sometimes side meat in late winter, and rarely we would treat ourselves to pop or a can of sardines or a little candy for the younger children.

In past years Cherokees had made their own clothes and when I was a child Cherokee homes usually had an old loom and spinning wheel in the loft of the house, but by the time I was born we bought most of our clothes. Most of money that we had in those days went to buy cloth to make dresses or "ready-made" clothes which were well used soon and much darned and mended; plus that rarest and most cherished of commodities, shoes. Children wore them only during the wintertime or on special formal occasions. We bought them "in town" and carried them, to save wear, more than we wore them. And a relative who was part-time cobbler repaired them.

Most Cherokee women in that era wore a red bandana around their heads, but all self-respecting Cherokee men wore Stetson hats. After a man had used well a Stetson hat he would pass it on to a younger teenage relative. I can remember one of the proudest times of my life was when, as a teenager I was allowed to buy my own new Stetson hat and a new pair of boots. My grandfather had a small income which brought in money every month but most others in our community amassed what little money they had by farm labor on the farms or ranches or the rich whites in the general area or by cutting and selling railroad cross-ties. There was, of course, in those days no welfare or social security, or pensions, or the like; nor were there old age homes. We would have been shocked at the suggestion that we should separate from our elderly whom we so cherished and put them in some building far away under the care of strangers. In fact, we saw few strangers in our community. A stranger was indeed a rarity and somewhat frightening, not simply to the children but to grown people as well. I remember my grandmother was particularly afraid of strange Whites and if a strange White came to our house, especially one well dressed, he would hide in the house and not answer the door. I was simply stunned by the

appearance of strangers. My grandfather spoke English well and was well traveled, but most of us were simple, country people; "full bloods", as whites called us.

Sometimes we saw Creek Indians traveling through our area, strung out in a line as was their custom, going to visit relatives who lived to the east of our settlement. Often they would stop to visit a while with my grandfather. They were a strange and exotic people to me even though I liked their laughing and friendly manner. Also, I knew I had distant relatives who were black people. (Many Cherokees were slaveholders in the old days.) My grandfather would visit with them on occasion when we met them in town and once in a while they would drop by the house if they were in need. They were kind and gentle, but really not of my world.

I had no reason to leave our community. Most of our wants were taken care of right in that area by our relatives. There were older women in our community who knew herbs and could cure most of our childhood diseases. My grandmother was one such person and her sister who lived in another community was a well-known herb doctor. Women, particularly older women delivered the children. If we needed someone to deal with serious illness, there was a neighboring community in which lived a very renowned Indian doctor. He was a distant relative, but still somewhat of a stranger and a little bit awesome because he was a holy man. If all else failed, there were old fashioned White country doctors in the area who could be relied upon and would be willing to wait great lengths of time for the payment of their fees or take produce in lieu of money. When someone was sick we all took care of them, cut their wood, and did their farm work for them. And if they died we laid them in the earth ourselves.

We had many religious ceremonies in our homes - birth ceremonies, curing rites, funerals, purification of the house, herb medicine before eating "green" corn, herb medicine at the Cherokee New Year in October, hunting rituals at the fireplace, planting ceremonies at the garden, rituals to insure plant growth at the garden in June, rituals to protect the house and garden from the fierce Oklahoma storms, religious purification before dawn at the spring many mornings, and so many I can't remember them all. I, also, knew that my grandfather used the old Cherokee war medicine (prayers and charms) in his work as a "law man". We had a ceremonial ground nearby called a "stomp ground". Once a month we would all go there for an all night worship dance, for a dance that was both fun and holy at the same time. At times, particularly in the warm weather months. We would assemble for larger ceremonies; sometimes traveling by horseback and wagon many miles to other stomp grounds for ceremonies lasting four to seven days. When we worshipped at our local ceremonial grounds it was with immediate relatives, and of course, most of the elders who were chiefs and priests of our ceremonial grounds were our grandfathers. When we journeyed to other ceremonial grounds for more tribal-wide ceremonial occasions, it was an even more festive occasion. It would take us several days by horseback and wagon to take the trip and we would camp under the trees and visit relatives from far off that we had not seen since last year, as well as friends. The local ceremonial grounds strengthened our local kin ties and celebrated those kin ties and our relationship with the land and God. Our ceremonies at the larger stomp grounds were for the whole tribe and were even more festive and joyous occasions.

In another community not too far away there was a small Cherokee Indian Baptist church and sometimes we would journey to that community to attend that church. The sermon was in

the Cherokee language, the hymns were sung in the Cherokee language, and the Bible was written in Cherokee. We would enjoy the service, the singing, the visiting, the worship, the communion, and being "honored" guests, so to speak. At times there would be what were called singings at this church which included all the Cherokee Baptist churches in our area and of course, we would always attend those; as well as grave decorating in May. In the fall all the Cherokee Baptists came together at a permanent campground for a week of worshipping together. This was as festive and as renewing an occasion as the large native ceremonies.

Of course, religious ceremonies were not our only entertainment. My grandfather was an avid card player and a very bad loser. We played cards a lot in our house and my grandfather always sulked when he lost. Some of my fathers were great gamblers as well. We didn't have many public garbs in our settlement, but in other Cherokee areas Indians played and bet on bow and arrow contests. However, there were many musicians and singers along our creek. On summer evenings there were always musicians playing and singing on someone's porch. "Little Brown Jug" was my grandfather's favorite, but my grandmother and I liked "Red Wing". I had one uncle who played a fine French harp (harmonica) and two sisters who could sing like the angels. And we became dedicated country music fans when, in the 1930s, my mother brought us home a radio from the city. Square dances were held almost monthly at one of the houses on the creek, and square dancing was one of those rare activities that brought Indians and Whites together. Since my grandfather always attended the square dances we had very little gun play then, even though the fruit jars of home brew and white liquor were being passed around out back of the house. Although Cherokees did not have the good horses of past years we still enjoyed a good horse race on a Sunday afternoon rodeo at a neighboring white rancher's place. And Cherokees were yet good horsemen and cowboys in those days, especially my own family. In fact, my mother could have become a professional sulky race driver if she had been a man. Except for large religious gatherings outside our small community we rarely needed to leave. We made our living there; we had our own doctors, and our religious expression there among our relatives. As we boys grew older, our attention turned toward the girls. It was very exciting to go to the church singings and the great Cherokee ceremonies where we would meet suitable girls who were not related to us and who were unknown and exciting human beings. But except for these few needs, we tended to live a self-contained life.

We tried to settle our differences among ourselves. There were, however, formal law enforcement agencies in the area. As I mentioned, my grandfather was a constable in a small town nearby. He had been a Cherokee Sheriff of one of the districts of the Cherokee Nation before the State of Oklahoma when our area was part of the Cherokee Nation; and later a United States marshal. The sheriff of our county was a Cherokee Indian and even the county judge was a Cherokee who could conduct his court proceedings in the Cherokee language if need be. However, all of this was outside of our lives. The "law" was a foreign agency to us and we tended not to get involved in such matters. There were in Oklahoma some cattle rustlers and bank robbers, Whites and a few Indians, but we never had enough cattle nor money to be worthy of their attention. And if some of the Indian outlaws who were related to us came to our community we welcomed them and hid them and never knew anything when the "law" inquired.

If the law was outside of our life, government and schools were even further outside our lives. This had not always been the case. When I was growing up I heard the older people,

raised before 1907, talk about when the Cherokee Indians had our own schools and government. Certainly, in that time, even Cherokees in the most isolated communities were involved in government and schools. But after the state of Oklahoma came into the Union and our government and schools were dissolved, we simply took no notice of such affairs and, by unspoken mutual agreement with our white neighbors, we took no part in government or formal education. We were exploited, to a degree, by formal government and there was much illegal taking of Indian land when I was growing up; but the local political "boss" of our county was a southern patron of the old school. He knew everyone by name, could speak a few words of bad Cherokee, and was always willing to do you a favor, every though he knew that most Cherokees did not vote in that time. However, this non-participation in politics did not, at the time, seem to be serious lack in our life. My family had fought on the Union side during the Civil War and our sympathy were with the Republican party; so even if we had bothered to vote we would have been an island of Indian Republicans in a sea of white Democrats.

The other thing that was outside of our life was schools. When I was growing up the older people were very suspicious of what they called the "Whiteman's schools", as opposed to Cherokee schools of earlier days. The older people suspected that these schools, which were controlled entirely by whites, might teach Cherokee children not to be good Cherokee Indians, but to be good Whites. So there was separation of our life from the schools. However, most of us ended up in the local one-room school house and although we were not part of the educational "act", our White neighbors sat on the school board and would certainly intercede for us if need be. We were still, in one room, with our older and younger relatives. My brother (a distant cousin in English terminology) was my school chum. On the playground, the Cherokee children usually played together mainly because of the language difference between the White kids and ourselves. School was not an unpleasant experience. At the time, it just seemed a bonny requirement of living. Very few Indians in those days completed the eighth grade and it was rare that an Indian young person went to high school. I was one of the few and my main motivation stemmed from being a runner and an interest in sports. But if school and government were far away from us the general White society was even further.

Once every couple of weeks we would all hitch up the wagon and ride into the county seat, usually on Saturday, sometimes on court day, for a day in town. The day was very exciting but very frightening so that the combination of fright and excitement made it thrilling. It was noisy; it was full of people; it was a cafeteria of pleasures and temptations. My grandfather's brother, the "gay blade" who I mentioned earlier, lived in town and worked as a night guard in the local bank. He always had money and when he met me in town on Saturday he would give me a dime to go to the picture show that afternoon, a cowboy show. My grandmother usually accompanied me, even though her English was limited and she didn't really understand the dialogue. Further, she thought the movie plots were immoral and would comment that "the meanest man always wins in those shows". But she liked horses and sat enthralled through the whole movie, watching the fine horses prance across the screen. One could stand on the street all day long and never "get one's eyes full". We met relatives and friends from far away; White friends of my grandfather would speak to us in a strange language and frighten me by trying to pick me up. I usually held my grandmother tightly by the hand, ready to run behind her skirts at the slightest hint of danger. However, as I came into my teens, I too liked to lean up against the building, tilt my Stetson hat forward, and "people watch". But town was a strange and foreign land and Whites were a strange

and foreign people. It was interesting, exciting, and thrilling, but I knew that at the end of the day we would go back home - the place where my relatives live and buried, where things were familiar; home where I was loved, home where the people, the land, and I were all of one piece.

When I was around twelve our life began to change significantly. The Dust Bowl and the Depression hit eastern Oklahoma full blast. Gardens failed for about four years straight. Wild foods were almost non-existent. Some White Oklahomans began to move to California seeking work. Many of us began to work "out in the public." When I was twelve I worked a year almost full time for a White dairy farmer and went to school as well. In the summer we all worked for White farmers "putting up" hay - 5 a day if you brought your own horse; and in the cold weather we cut timber. One summer I went visiting in another state and worked in a mine. Life was hard in those years, but it was still full and rich in human terms. Unlike most Cherokees, I went on to high school. (I was an athlete.) My high school experience was both pleasant and unpleasant. I enjoyed athletics and learning, but it was an uncomfortable social situation. There was one other Indian boy in my class and we "hung together", but I did make a few white friends.

Some aspects of life at home were beginning to change, as well. I was taking on more responsibility and becoming a youth rather than child, and some of my relationships were changing. I began to associate a lot with boys my own age, strictly separated from the girls, from about the age of twelve the sexes are socially separated among Cherokees. I was very shy, even at fifteen, and only vaguely interested in girls, but some male friends and kin were actually courting girls - visiting their homes or meeting them at social or religious gatherings. The older people kept an eye on us, in case we might become interested in a female relative or to gauge how serious the affair was. They never interfered openly, but somehow later on at the right time the "right" pair settled down together. If a "love child" was produced from a casual affair it was simply taken as a gift from the Creator, without stigma attached to either mother or child. But serious courting usually did not take place until one was 18 or 20. However, it was at this time in my life that I became aware of a world of women separate, distinct, and somewhat hidden from the world of men.

I do not know how life went for maidens my own age in those times but I can tell you some observations of later years, particularly from watching my daughter grow up. Cherokee society is very women oriented. Our family line is traced through the female. Our most powerful "gods" were female. We call the source of life and energy, the Sun, "Our Grandmother". Cherokee women "own" the land and the home. Many men, even today, live in their wife's community after marriage. The mother and her brothers guide the lives of children. Cherokee women manage and direct the household and thus, indirectly, Cherokee society. Older women prepare young women in their "teens" to be managers and directors of Cherokee life. The oldest girl of a household already knows how to raise children and tend a house. In this "teen age" period they learn not only skills and responsibility, but also how to gently manage social relations so as to direct the community. At the same time they are encouraged to enjoy the freedom of their youth. And like most American Indian females, they like their suitors a little "wild". I sometimes feel that Cherokee men are kept around just to make life a little more exciting. But in my youth Indian women were simply beautiful, exciting, and mysterious creatures.

In 1942 I graduated from high school and prepared to go into the service, since World War II had commenced. My uncle came to me before I left and gave me a great gift. He taught me an ancient Cherokee prayer-song which would protect me in battle and gave me a protective charm as well. When I left for the service I knew that even if I were in a strange place, I still had a home where I was loved; that even though I might get lonely I was never alone; that I would live on this Earth as long as the Cherokee people lived. I guess I was coming to “realize something”, as the Cherokees say. I guess I was becoming a young man.

This kind of life I lived as a child and a youth in a Cherokee community is probably fairly typical of the life of most Indians of my generation, but in some ways the Cherokee situation is unique when compared to many other Indian groups. Cherokees did not live on a reservation and were never strictly reservation Indians. Before 1907, when Oklahoma became a state, the Cherokee people were citizens of a small independent republic called the Cherokee Nation and after the state of Oklahoma. We became a minority of the citizens of Oklahoma, the majority being recently integrated whites from other states. Secondly, the Cherokees had been uprooted from our native land, our “old country”, and driven west in the late 1830s. Most other Indian peoples in the United States still reside in their aboriginal homeland. Thirdly, Cherokees when I was growing up still made their living from the land. This was not possible for other tribes in large areas of the United States. An example in the extreme were the Indians of the Great Plains who were buffalo hunters and after 1880 with the extermination of the buffalo found themselves existing at the largess of the federal government.

There have been changes in Cherokee life in the last 40 years, particularly since World War II. The mainstay of Cherokee economic life is no longer subsistence gardening. Cherokee gardening is carried on to a very limited extent today. However, there is still extensive hunting, and the gathering of wild foods. But cash from wage labor or welfare payments have become much more prominent and working together on the land less common. Secondly, Cherokees stay in school much longer than before and most Cherokees over 10 and under 50 now speak both English and Cherokee. Thirdly, Cherokees have become more involved in schools and government. Not only are Cherokee children staying in school longer but also Cherokee adults are being included at least to a small degree in school affairs by way of Indian education programs and the like nowadays in schools. In recent years the federal government has promoted a resurrected Cherokee tribal government controlled by local Whites and of limited power and function, but which, however, actively runs great many social and economic programs for the Cherokee people. Cherokees are now involved to a much greater extent in the governing of their lives, for good or ill, than ever before.

The major change in Cherokee life besides wages is that Cherokee communities are not as physically or socially isolated as they once. Paved roads run everywhere through the Cherokee country now, and White society is closer both physically and emotionally to Cherokees now. There has also been real deal of change in the shape of the land. Highways have changed the landscape; there are now many more people living on the land; there are many man-made lakes in the Cherokee area: parks, tourist facilities and the like are all over eastern Oklahoma. Many of these changes are not to the Cherokee liking. White society is intruding too quickly and too intensively into Cherokee communities and while, from Cherokee eyes, is damage to and exploitation of the country is disturbing to Cherokees. Most Cherokees see the land as being

mistreated and are becoming aware of how much they love their land as they see it becoming damaged.

In recent years, however, many Indian families have moved to city areas and Indian young people in cities live much like others in the city, with some significant differences. There is usually an Indian center in cities where Indians can come together for social gatherings and see friends and other city Indians. Many city Indian families spend a great deal of time visiting back home in their rural “home” communities, and in most areas in the United States now there are Indian pow-wows held during the summer. Indian families are able to gather and camp for a weekend of association with fellow Indians when they desire and finances enable them. I am sure that in reading this chapter so far, you have come to understand that young Indians grow up in an environment of the known and loved and have a strong sense of place and roots and identity and continuity; although some tribes now have severe social problems such as crime, heavy drinking, and the like. Further, you must also have seen from this material that there is very little of what is called a generation gap among Indians. Life flows from one generation to another, but perhaps one could say this about many communities in the world.

However, there is one way in which the life of children and youth among American Indians contrasts with almost any other communities in the world; that is the degree of freedom and respect given to children. All Indians receive respect and are given freedom by their kinsmen regardless of their age. If there is one feature of American Indian life that is noticeable and contrasts with most any other group in the world, it is the idea that each individual regardless of age, sex, position, or what have you, is entitled to privacy and respect as an individual. Some anthropologists have commented on how North American Indians rarely interfere with one another and how little “authority” there is in Indian tribes. In fact, Indians will rarely give unsolicited advice or even directions in a car. Even if an Indian knows you are going the wrong way, most will simply sit quietly because their opinion has not been asked. One does not intrude upon the privacy or integrity of another, particularly one’s kinsmen with whom harmony is important. Many authors have commented on how North American Indians live in harmony with the natural world but harmony with one’s kinsmen is as great a value as harmony with the natural world.

Indian parents have no notion that they are “raising” a child or molding a human being or do things for the good of the child. A child is simply a small kinsman and one lives in harmony with a small kinsmen. That does not mean that one expects a small kinsmen to be as knowledgeable as a large kinsmen or even as efficient as a large kinsmen, but small kinsman has the same rights and in some senses the same responsibilities as a large kinsman. But one would not allow a small kinsman to violate one’s own rights. There is a give and take in this relationship. One does not interfere in the business of a kinsman and one reacts with some sense of violation if a kinsman interferes in one’s own business, regardless if the person is large or small. Cherokees do not interrupt other Cherokees regardless of age, and an adult Cherokees would be just as offended by an interruption on the part of a child as he or she would be by such behavior on the part of an adult. Further, since one does not interfere or intrude on or coerce. This means a child or an adult is free to learn at his or her own pace. Learning and tasks are voluntary so that children, like adults, learn at their own pace, participating and helping one another at things they feel competent to “take hold of”. Cherokee children are never told when to take part in an

activity in order to learn, or when not to take part in an activity in order not to lessen the efficiency of the activity.

As a child or as a teenager I can rarely remember being “called down” by anyone, much less physically disciplined. I remember sometimes when I was a small child and making a lot of noise my grandmother would say to me rather disapprovingly, “The Cherokees don’t make a lot of racket.” She was informing me that it is not in the nature of the Cherokee to make a lot of noise and that if I made a lot of noise it must be that I’m not truly a Cherokee - a condition which was a little frightening for me. I have had adults divert my attention when it looked like I was going to injure myself and I have later in life done the same thing with my own children. I have even had my grandmother (aunts) tell me that “old raw-head and bloody bones” lived in the well or tell me stories about different spirits which lived in the woods and in the dark at night. I presume to discourage me from wandering off by myself in the woods or around at nights. But they never had to tell me not to wander off at night nor tell me not to look-in the well. I have had my grandmother say, when I was playing in bed late at night, that I had better go to sleep or else I would draw the attention of some lurking spook, perhaps “old raw head and bloody bones”. (I can remember being shown his picture on an old iodine bottle once!) But all these were indirect pressures and I was rarely openly forbidden to do something or openly ordered to do something. I participated in activities as I saw fit. However, if I assumed some responsibility on my own and then began to be lax, I would get disapproving looks and a “cold shoulder”. In fact, one of the major sanctions which Cherokees use is to simply withdraw when they see some behavior of which they disapprove. This is not consciously aimed at forcing the errant child to “get in line” but it certainly accomplishes the job. Indians are very responsive and sensitive to the moods of one another, are very sensitive to criticism; and the withdrawal of access to one’s self on the part of a loved adult can be devastating to Indian children.

All this is to say that Cherokee adults live with Cherokee children in the same manner they live with other Cherokee adults. They do not order, coerce, intrude into another’s privacy or integrity, and they expect the same behavior in return. When they do not get the same behaving in return, they would disapprove and withdraw. I can only remember one time in my life when I was disciplined in the strict sense of the word. And this was by the “uncle” I mentioned earlier, who lived in a community some seven miles away. I had during a time when we were butchering hogs got hold of a hog intestine and pulled it down close to the fence by the road. When a group of young girls dressed in their finery on their way to school came by, I chased them and threw the hog intestine around their legs. When I went back to the house that night, my grandfather told me that he had heard that there was a wild boy loose in the woods and that this wild boy had chased a group of young Cherokee girls. He asked me if I had seen this wild boy. I replied that I hadn’t and that I did not know anything about this wild boy. He said that perhaps we should go down and see if we could find his tracks but I countered by saying that such a wild boy had probably left the country by now. He suggested that we go get my uncle, whose opinion I was extremely sensitive to, to come over and see if he could track the wild boy. I was very much against such a move.

The next week we were cracking nuts one night on the hearthstone by the fireplace and I heard a moaning sound. I looked around and coming in the window was a figure dressed in rags, moaning, with the hair down over its face, and with an ugly disfigured countenance (a gourd mask). This figure crawled in my direction and I became terrified. My grandfather asked this

figure what it wanted and it replied in almost unintelligible Cherokee that it was looking for bad boys. My grandfather said he knew of no bad boys in the area but the being kept pointing at me. I confessed that I was the “wild boy” that had thrown the hog intestine on the young girls. My grandfather finally interceded and said he was sure that I wouldn’t do such a thing again and pleaded with the being to depart which it did; slowly backwards, moaning and gyrating out through the window.

I’m afraid I was almost in trauma for two or three days and I discontinued my career as a wild boy after that. I found out later in life that this being was my uncle from the distant community – my mother’s brother, the kinsman who traditionally in Cherokee society disciplines children. I have also heard of children who acted so badly that it was thought that their mind must be wrong and were taken through a curing rite which is very uncomfortable, and involves the scratching all over of the child with the teeth of a garfish. But I have never seen such a rite or known anyone who has gone through it, my only personal experience with discipline was the one and only time my uncle crawled through the window wearing rags and a gourd mask to frighten me into good behavior. I do not remember being struck at all and rarely being “called down”. At times if children fought, older people would tell them that if they fight like that they will bring sickness into the home, which is a significant deterrent for unruly fighting among younger children. And as I say, mild scaring or even diverting attention is used on children. Children are simply thought of as small adults. Babies, of course, are in a different category. They cannot talk or walk but they are thought of as being very special human beings with powers to sense things that other humans cannot, slowly as children grow into competent adults their powers as special beings decline. But in no way are they thought of as an inferior being or a human being that will be completed in the future. They are given the same freedom, that same responsibility if they choose it, the same respect, the same degree of privacy as any adult and they are held to those standards as well.

Indians simply accept others as they are. We value our old people exceedingly because they are wise. If they are forgetful we overlook something which can’t be helped. If they are slow physically we simply wait on them. One of my playmates as a child was a boy who was “afflicted, not quite right”. We knew that he did not understand teasing and would get upset, and he got in the way a lot; so we did not tease him and we made room for him in our games. If someone is eccentric, that is his way; perhaps the spiritual world has told him something we don’t know about. If a boy is “sissified” and would rather be around women, that’s up to him. It is his business; who are we to say? It is more important that we are relatives and should live together in harmony.

Life was hard when I was a child, sometimes a little boring; and the fear of witchcraft was a little “heavy”. But what I remember most vividly was the freedom, the love, and the respect.