A History of the True People - The Cherokee Indians - Chapter 3

Robert K. Thomas
At the Edge of the Prairie
It was like that prophecy said, the Americans were determined to get all our land and drive us to the edge of the prairie, so they did everything they could to break the Cherokees down and drive them west. Georgia passed a law saying that the Cherokee laws didn't hold. Then Georgia people started coming into the Cherokee Nation and arresting Indians. They took over Cherokee homes and threw the Cherokees out of them and persecuted the people. The whites had a regular lottery for Cherokee holdings. If you were a settler and you drew a certain area, you just went into the Nation and if there was a Cherokee there you just put him out. As a matter of fact, they gave out chances on the best houses and land. The head chief at that time was John Ross, in Cherokee Jani Goowisgoowi (egret). He got kicked out of his home. He was a rich man with a big plantation and a lot of slaves. When the settlers took over his house and land, he had to take his family and go live in a log hut over in Tennessee. The Cherokees couldn't hold their national council by Georgia law at this time either. They had to meet in the Tennessee part of the Cherokee Nation. But the whites couldn't break them.

Gold was discovered in the eastern part of the Cherokee Nation and Georgia people flooded into that section. That is the reason the Cherokees covered up all the mines in the Indian Territory later on. The old Indians say gold is a sickness for whites. It drives them crazy. But the Cherokees held on there in Georgia in spite of all the trouble.

Finally the president of the United States, Andrew Jackson, sent an agent to make a treaty with anyone he could find to make a treaty with. You know, the Cherokees helped Jackson defeat the Creeks. Then when he became president he turned on us. The Cherokees named him Chickensnake then, because he had charmed the Cherokees the way a snake will charm a chicken. One old chief said, "I stood by Jackson at the Horseshoe when we whip Crockett stood u us west be stop of whor and wa There Stand Quite say th we got Echota even c anyway he sig men s though out o the C condi paid Cherc like all l
we whipped the Creeks. If I had known he would drive us from our homes, I
would have killed him that day at the Horseshoe." Jackson ran Davy
Crockett out of Congress and off to Texas because he was our friend and
stood up for the Cherokees in Congress. Jackson was determined to drive
us west. The Supreme Court ruled for the Cherokees, but Jackson wouldn't
be stopped. He just kept right on.

The agent Jackson sent to the Cherokees bribed twenty people, some
of whom were on the council. Major Ridge was the speaker of the council
and was a well respected man too, but he allowed himself to be bribed.
There was twenty altogether including Major Ridge, John Ridge, Boudinot,
Stand Watie, James Starr, Archilla Smith, Jack Bell, Adair, and others.
Quite a few of them were educated men and that is the reason Cherokees
say that for every good leader like John Ross who was an educated man,
we got one like John Ridge who was a traitor. These men met at New
Echota in 1835 and signed the removal treaty. Most of them weren't
even council members but just private citizens. They signed the treaty
anyway. Major Ridge said, "I have signed my own death warrant."
he signed the treaty. Now their relatives said that the reason these
men signed the treaty and went against the Cherokees was because they
thought it was the best thing to do. They wanted to get the Cherokees
out of there because the whites wouldn't leave them alone in peace and
the Cherokees were just going downhill and degenerating under those
conditions. Cherokees who followed John Ross said that the signers were
paid to sign the treaty. I think it was probably both ways. I know how
Cherokees are. They are hardheaded when they think they are right, just
like Sequoyah. They accused Sequoyah of being a witch and his wife burned
all his stuff but he didn't give up, he just went ahead. Also, the old
people say Cherokees are like that. If somebody won't listen to anything, the old Cherokees say that they're an old time fullblood, they think they know everything. I know the Cherokees, so I believe the relatives of the treaty signers. I also believe what Ross's people said. Most of my family followed Ross and they said that the white people bribed those Indians to sign the treaty. I think that is true because the whites used to bribe chiefs just to keep in practice.

After they signed the treaty, the Ridges and their families and the other men and their families went west. My mother's kinfolks had gone to the St. Francis River, but after the New Madrid earthquake when the St. Francis River flowed backwards, they left and moved up to the Ozarks. At that time it was Spanish territory. When the Americans caught up with them again, I think along about 1818, they took out of there. John Bowles and Bill Dutch and their followers went on to Texas. They lived in Texas for a long time. Most of the Cherokees there were under John Bowles but some of them were under Bill Dutch. Bill Dutch had two tribes under him. One was a bunch of Cherokees and one was a bunch of Kickapoos. The Kickapoos were bad people in that time so I know those Cherokees who were under Bill Dutch were bad actors because the Kickapoos didn't hang around anyone who wasn't a bad actor. In fact, when I was a little boy the old Cherokees used to refer to the Texas Cherokees as outlaws.

The reason the Cherokees left Texas, according to the story, was that one time there was a white man and his two sons fishing on the river. Some young Cherokees came by and killed them out of pure meanness. Texas was an independent country in the 1830's and they jumped on the Cherokees and ran them up to the Indian Territory. Those Texas Cherokees came up to the Indian Territory about 1838. Some of them settled out south of modern Oklahoma
Oklahoma City in the western part of the Chickasaw Nation on the edge of the Great Plains. Others settled west of where the whites put Tulsa. They wanted to hunt the buffalo. Bill Dutch had come up a little earlier in 1836 and settled just east of present day Eufaula, Oklahoma. That's really my home place on what they call Dutch's Creek. There are no Indians there now. They all moved out of there, but that was an Indian settlement when I was a kid.

Most of the Cherokees didn't leave Arkansas and go to Texas. They stayed right there in Arkansas. That was good hunting country. Also the bottom lands were rich. Those Arkansas Cherokees had big farms, lots of slaves, and herds of fine horses. They were rich people. Most of them had been war captains back in the old country. They were strong willed men. They didn't like missionaries and Christianity. They could speak English and they were rich but they were uncivilized. The Arkansas Cherokees used to sell their produce in New Orleans. They dressed their wives in the finest silks and their guns and tomahawks were inlaid with silver. The Cherokees hadn't fought with other Indians since the peace in 1760, but I suppose it was in the cards that the Arkansas Cherokees would cross swords with the western Indians. Of course, it was with the Osages, mainly.

However, the old Cherokees say that the trouble with the Osages started by a misunderstanding. They say that some Osage boys raided into Arkansas. They burned houses, shot hogs, stole horses, and shot at people. They killed several Cherokees. The head war captain in those days among the Arkansas Cherokees was Johnson Rock, Sequoyah's brother. He raised a party and pursued the Osages. They caught the Osage boys in camp on the Illinois River over in what is now Oklahoma. They killed them and scalped them, but
the Cherokees laid the scalps by the bodies as a sign that they had been killed in revenge for the slain Cherokees, not to start a war. But the Osages wouldn't let it go. So a long and bloody war took place between the two peoples. They say Bill Dutch killed over twenty Osages in single combat. The Osages hated him. Maybe that's why he went to Texas.

The worst battle was fought at Claremore Mound, near modern Claremore, Oklahoma. The Osages were camped there, but most of the men had gone out to the buffalo plains to hunt. The Cherokees hit the camp at night and killed most of the women and teenagers in the dark before they realized what had happened. The Osages still hold hard feelings because of that battle. I guess I can't blame them.

Sometimes the Arkansas Cherokees would lock horns with the Cheyennes when they went out to hunt buffalo at the Great Salt Plains. And the Texas Cherokees were always picking on those little tribes in Texas. In 1830 the Arkansas Cherokees moved west into the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. And by the mid-1830's they were finally trying to make peace with the western tribes. By 1836 all the Arkansas Cherokees had moved over to the Indian Territory and most of the Texas people were up there then, too. That's where the Cherokees with Major Ridge moved to.

The biggest part of the Cherokees wouldn't move, especially those people in North Carolina. There were a lot of real fullblood Cherokees up in North Carolina and north Georgia. They were strong followers of John Ross. John Ross kept telling them that they should try to hold out as long as they could, not to raise any trouble because the United States would just use that as an excuse to kill them off. Then an army came in and disarmed the Cherokees.

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There would be looters following the troops. The looters would take the stock and whatever house furnishings you had. Then the army would burn the house. Then they would take you down to the stockades that had been built in different parts of the Cherokee Nation. They kept the Cherokees in those stockades from along in the spring of 1838 to about September. A lot of people died. One reason was that there were no toilet facilities. Another was that the army had contracted out to different white merchants to supply the food. They gave the Cherokees flour which Cherokees didn't know how to fix, and which was so full of maggots that they couldn't eat it anyhow. Therefore, a lot of them died of starvation and dysentery. Typhoid fever killed some of them because the lack of proper toilet facilities made the water bad in the summer heat.

The army finally started gathering all the Cherokees together at the Cherokee agency at Calhoun, Tennessee. They brought all those people from the stockades together there so that the army could move them west. The army took a few parties of Indians west and it was really bad. Conditions and management by the army was bad. Lots of those Cherokees died on the trip. Finally, Ross and the council said that if the army didn't let them manage the move there would be no more Cherokees left because of the way they were doing it. The army agreed.

Now each Cherokee settlement had what they called a little captain, a little war chief, and when the war with the Americans was over he became the head of the cooperative working in the local settlement. Back in the old days and even when I was a little boy, the Cherokees would start out in the spring and everyone would help you put in your garden. The neighbors would all work at one place on one day and another place on the next. All you would have to do was feed them. All your relatives would come there and
cook and they would make a regular party out of it. I have seen two or three teams in the field turning ground for a big garden and maybe a little corn crop. Now the little captain was head of these work parties and he was head of the stick ball team too in the old days. So what the chiefs were going to do to move the people west was make parties of about 1,000 people each and put three head captains in charge of each party. Each little captain in the party would be responsible for the families of his settlement. The people were all mixed together in the stockades but they knew who was who and from what settlements they came. That is the way the Cherokees did it. The Cherokees usually have a head and an assistant head for different tasks but in this case they had three head captains for each party in case one of them died on the way. They moved in something like 12 or maybe 14 big parties. There were about 14,000 people to be moved. Many had already died off in those stockades. Probably about 2,000 or 3,000 died before they even started west. All the others were sick and weak from being in those camps and they had to start moving in October. They traveled all through the winter and it was about the last of February when they got to the Indian Territory. Because of their weakened condition and the harsh weather a lot of them died on the way. Most of the little children under five and most of the older people over 60 died. Altogether they started out with 14,000 and ended with 10,000. They lost almost 1/3 of the people in that removal. My great grandmother could remember the removal. It was called the Trail of Tears because so many died on that journey.

That removal left a mark on the Cherokee soul. They were uprooted from the land they loved and taken far from the graves of their fathers. They lost their homes and were driven like cattle to a strange country. They buried their children and their parents by the side of the road to sleep of a
never sayin Chero We go livin "This way v already Bowlo The I Terr the his hous int loot hol dro sol for the too the
sleep forever among a foreign people. And all this was done in the name of a crooked treaty and simply for the greed of land. The Cherokees have never trusted whites since that time. The Cherokees still mark time by saying so many years before the removal or so many years after the removal. Cherokees still call the country we were driven from "our old country." We go back there to get certain herbs and to visit the Cherokees still living there in the Smokys. The Creeks in Oklahoma sing a song that says, "This is not my country, but I'm used to it now." I guess that's the way we feel, too.

My mother's people didn't go through the removal because they were already in the Indian Territory, having come up there from Texas. John Bowles was killed in Texas and Hard Mush became head chief after that. The Hard Mush and Bill Dutch and their followers moved up into the Indian Territory from Texas and they were already there when the removal started. The people that were in Indian Territory were called "the old settlers" and the ones who came there during the removal were called "immigrant Cherokees."

My father's side of the family were the "immigrant Cherokees" and his grandmother was in the removal. She said the soldiers came to their house when she was a little girl. They were eating when the soldiers came in the door and told them to come outside. When they went outside, the looters went into the house and took all their nice porcelain and household stuff. They had a smokehouse and the looters took all their hams and drove off their milk cow. As the looters were driving their cow off, the soldiers set the house on fire. Then my great grandmother's father asked for a few minutes to pray before they left. They had a prayer and while they were praying, my great grandmother caught her pet baby goose. She took her pet goose with her down to the stockade and kept it with her all the time they were there. When they started on the removal, she carried
it with her all the way. There were wagons for sick people but everyone else had to walk. She had to walk too, even though she was only a little girl. She said when they came through Illinois to the Mississippi River, it was in the wintertime and very cold. It was probably about the last of December or the first of January. The river was frozen over so the people had to walk over the ice to cross the Mississippi River. There were about 1,000 people in her party and they divided up to cross at different places. She was going across with her little bunch of maybe 100 people and she saw another bunch of people about 1/8 mile in front of her on the ice. Then she heard something like leaves crackling. She looked around and saw something come running up the ice that looked just like a long, thin snake. That little mark on the ice that made a noise like crackling leaves went right past her feet and then a big wall of white raised up in front of her and then went down again. When it went down there was nobody over there where that other group had been. The floe had tipped when the ice cracked and the party on the other end of it just slid right into the river. She was so scared she squeezed her pet goose to death. She carried that goose with her for a couple of days after that and finally someone took it away from her and buried it. She froze her toes on that long, cold trek. They were still black when she was an old lady.

She also remembered when they walked into the Indian Territory. Most of them came in at a place called Bread Town which is over close to modern Westville, Oklahoma on the Arkansas line. The reason they called it Bread Town was because that was where the government was giving out the rations to the Indians. The Cherokees had been short of food on the trip and had to hunt on the way. The parties coming in camped there. Each little captain would go out and scout the countryside until he found a good place for his people. Along a the Che people in Okla though Those c peace w the twc and s just to had it Keys, knew J those the act treaty Major men f to be signe this clans. In f that peop
people. Then all his people would go and settle at that place, maybe along a little creek there in the Ozarks. The removal didn't break up the Cherokees. The settlements kept together. Some of those settlements in Oklahoma have still got the same names that they had back east. Even though the Cherokees lost a lot of people they weren't completely disorganized. Those communities and kinfolics hung in together.

After the Cherokees got to the Indian Territory, they wanted to make peace with the old settlers. They started to make negotiations to merge the two new governments. Sequoyah was living in the Indian Territory then. He and John Ross called the people together to make a peace. Then those men who had signed the treaty came around and talked to those old settlers and spooked some of them. They told the old settlers that John Ross was just trying to take them over. Well, I guess the Cherokees had finally had it with those men. The Chief Justice of the Cherokee Nation, Riley Keys, had a secret meeting that night and didn't invite John Ross. They knew John Ross wouldn't like what they were planning. It was a trial for those Cherokees who had signed the treaty. But it was a trial held without the accused being present. They selected seven men from each clan that the treaty signers belonged to so that they might be judged. For example, Major Ridge was of the deer clan so they picked seven well respected old men from the deer clan and told them to talk it over and judge what was to be done with Major Ridge. They did this for each of the men who had signed the treaty. Now by this time the Cherokees had a court system so this way of doing was more like the old time way. Each of those juries of clansmen, I think all but a couple, condemned the treaty signers to die. In fact, the Cherokees had made a law right after the killing of Doublehead that anyone who sold the Cherokee land against the wishes of the Cherokee people would become a public outlaw and could be executed by any Cherokee
citizen. So it seems to me that they were even going through legal processes when they didn't have to; looks like they were bending over backwards to be fair. Anyhow, after they condemned the treaty signers, they chose twenty men for each treaty signer as executioners. The way they chose the men was to pass around a hat filled with white and black beans to all the men of one clan. There were twenty black beans and maybe a hundred white beans in the hat. They would pass the hat to each member of one clan. If you took out a black bean that meant you were on the committee to kill the member of your clan who signed the treaty. For example, when they passed the hat to members of the deer clan and you pulled out a black bean then you were on that committee of twenty people from the deer clan to execute Major Ridge, because he was of the deer clan. They did each of the condemned men that way so that they ended up with about twenty committees of twenty people each to be executioners. All but one or two of the treaty signers were condemned.

The next day Allen Ross was sent over to his father's house to visit with him and to keep John Ross busy so he wouldn't hear about what was in the air and try to stop it.

They carried out their plans and killed Major Ridge, Elias Boudinot, John Ridge, but they missed James Starr, Archilla Smith, and Stand Watie. Archilla Smith got away for a long time and, in fact, they never did kill him. He got in a gunfight with an Indian man named McIntosh and killed him. The Cherokee courts tried and executed him for murder. James Starr was killed later on. Watie was never killed. He was a brother of Boudinot. He and Elias Boudinot were nephews of Major Ridge. Boudinot wasn't his real name, he just took that white man's name from the man who sponsored him through school in New England. The committee of twenty to kill Stand Watie stayed in existence until after the Civil War, but they could never
kill him. Stand Watie was a Confederate general and during the Civil War the Union Cherokees shot at him a hundred times. He was the first one into battle. He rode a white horse and always led the Indian cavalry across the battlefield. There would be twenty Union Cherokee rifles on him in every battle but he never got a scratch. It was in 1839 when they formed that committee. Throughout all those years until after the Civil War they tried, but they could never kill him. They say the reason they couldn't kill Stand Watie was because he had war medicine that would make you think he was in one place when he was really in another.

The head of the committee appointed to kill Major Ridge was Bird Doublehead, the son of the old war captain Doublehead. I guess he finally evened the score. Another well known Indian, Creek Beaver, was on one of those assassination committees. Someone asked him one time if he thought it was right to kill the treaty signers like they did. Creek Beaver said, "Well there were a lot of honest Indians in the Cherokee Nation after that."

Seven of the treaty signers, finally, asked for mercy and were pardoned by the Cherokee government.

After they killed all those treaty signers the Cherokee Nation almost had a civil war. The relatives of the men who were executed didn't like it. The meanest ones were the Starrs, my relatives. James Starr had a whole bunch of boys, Tom, Ellis, Bean and several others. They just raised heck when their daddy was killed. In fact, I think they killed most of that committee who had killed their daddy. It was almost a regular civil war but after a few years it quieted down. The Cherokee authorities finally had to make a treaty with Tom Starr and his brothers.

The Cherokees picked a spot for their capital then. They picked a pretty little valley in the center of the Cherokee settlements. A clear
creek runs through the little valley and there was good spring water and shade trees there, a good place for the Indians to camp. The doctors put medicine down to keep away the bad winds and a tornado has never touched down there since that time. They named it Tahlequah after the Cherokees' third resting place and old mother town of Tellico in the old country. They first put up an arbor for the council to sit. Later they built a capitol building and court house and other public buildings. Even though it doesn't belong to us anymore, the old Cherokees still like to sit under the shade trees around our old capitol building in the modern town of Tahlequah. I guess that is our fifth resting place.

After things had quieted down, the Cherokees called a meeting of all the tribes. All the tribes in the Indian Territory and Kansas and Nebraska all came to Tahlequah in 1843. The Cherokees decided to do as they had been instructed a hundred years before and that was to take up that stick and stir up the fire and make a light in the Indian Territory. There must have been thirty tribes crowded around together there in that country. They were from the Midwest and the South and they were fighting with the Plains tribes. The Cherokees wanted to make a firm peace with all the Indians so even the Plains tribes were invited. There were Comanches, Wichita, Pawnees, Poncas from Nebraska, Potawatomies, and Osages from Kansas at the council. When all the tribes gathered at Tahlequah, the Cherokees brought out the wampum belts and explained them. John Ross "chaired" the meeting because he was the Cherokee chief, the host. George Lowery, the second chief, told the tradition about the origin of the wampum belts. And Hard Mush explained the meaning of each of the wampum belts to the assembled Indian nations. The peace was made firm and I think that peace included even more tribes than the peace in 1760. This time more tribes were brought together. I don't think the Pawnees, Witchitas, and Comanches were in on that first peace. They lived too far west.
The Three Fires - Potawatomies, Ottawas, and Chippewas - sent a pipe made of blue stone, blue to represent the sky. They also sent a fan of eagle feathers to sweep the white path clean of blood. The Cherokees put down a fire there at Tahlequah. After that first meeting, the Creeks took it over and had several councils in their country, but the Cherokees had to come with those wampum belts. If the Cherokees weren't there, they couldn't hold the council. The Cherokees were the keepers of the wampum belts. So the Cherokees did make fire at Tahlequah but that was the only fire they made. The Cherokees didn't have any fires in their local settlements at all. Every settlement in the old Cherokee country had a fire before the removal, but after they came to the Indian Territory they didn't put any fires down. They just put that main fire down at Tahlequah and then they let the Creeks take it over so the Cherokees just had fire there for one year.

The Indians made a firm peace then, even with the Osages who wouldn't make peace before. But there was one thing wrong. The Osages took off before they smoked the pipe. The Osages pledged the peace but they didn't seal it because they didn't smoke the pipe. About ten years ago the Osages came to the Cherokees and smoked the pipe. The Cherokees still have the original pipe. I don't know whether it was legal or not because the Osages who came were not blood chiefs, just the elected chairman of the Osage tribe smoked. I think that to really be legal the Osage blood chiefs have to smoke the pipe. I don't know why the Osages didn't smoke the pipe before in 1843 unless they didn't know they were supposed to smoke it. The Osages were not very civilized people then and I don't think they even knew they missed anything. For some reason they left before the pipe was smoked. It could have been that they saw some Indians there that they had done some
meanness to and they didn't want to stay around. When they came to smoke the pipe ten years ago, I asked the head chief of the Ketoowa Society, Stokes Smith, about it. He said that even though the Osages' chief was not a blood chief, but simply the elected chief, he could still smoke for the Osages. I guess it is legal.

The Cherokees had the first calamity like it was prophesied and they survived it and began to come up again. They had a period of peace and prosperity along about from 1845 to 1860. The land in the Indian Territory wasn't as rich as in our old country back east, but there was lots of game. The people lived good then. Some Cherokees began trading with the Kiowas and Comanches. They brought Mexican captives back to the Cherokee Nation with them. Several Cherokee families today come from those captives. Some Cherokees went to California in the Gold Rush in 1849. There were several Cherokee settlements out there then. John R. Ridge became the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle and Dennis Bushyhead was the sheriff of San Diego. Some of them came home but others just stayed. You meet Indians and whites out there today who are part Cherokee from those times. Lots of Cherokees went out there in the 1830's and are still there.

Many Cherokees became wagon train guides and scouts in that era. They laid out the Cherokee Trail which links the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. It ran up by Denver. Those Cherokee scouts discovered gold in Colorado and sparked off the famous Colorado gold rush in 1856. But they just walked off and left their diggings. The Cherokees aren't money hungry. They would rather be free to come and go as they please.

Life was full for the Cherokees after they finally settled down in the Indian Territory. But in 1859 you could see the Civil War coming. Now the Treaty Party, with Stand Watie as their leader, were friendly with the South at that time. It became even clearer at this time what people
they were really attached to. There was a new generation of the Treaty Party growing up and those children were really ceasing to be Indians. Stand Watie was an Indian and he spoke Cherokee, but you could see that his children were leaning mostly toward the whites and the same was true of most of those people's children.

The Cherokees began to get nervous. A lot of things were coming together at the same time. I think up until that time, the Cherokees didn't think you could make a white man out of a Cherokee. I think they thought that Cherokees could get bad or corrupted but I don't think they thought that a Cherokee could ever become like a white man, lose the Cherokee language and take up white ways. The old Cherokees think a lot of things are in your blood, that you inherit them. For example, if you are a Cherokee and you open your mouth to talk, Cherokee should just come out naturally. But they began to see these changes and they were worried. So they began to meet together to keep up the Cherokee medicine. Back before 1800 in the old country the Cherokee religion was formally organized. They had chiefs and medicine men for every settlement. The whole nation had seven medicine men to guide the head chiefs. The new Cherokee government was a secular government, a republic. They elected a new chief every four years. John Ross was elected chief from 1827 to 1866. Anyway, the fullbloods decided to organize formally as they had been before the removal, before the Cherokee republic had come into being. The Cherokee republic was organized in 1827 when they made that constitution and set up schools and a court system. The fullblood Cherokees felt at this time that they wanted to reorganize the way they had been before.

When the fullbloods decided to organize, they met in two places. One was at a place called the Big Shed Church. In the 1800's a lot of Cherokees
became Baptists, especially those people in North Carolina who were pretty old timey people. They didn't speak any English. They settled, after the removal, in an area close to the Arkansas border. Their main church was called the Big Shed and it was the first church they put down. There weren't too many churches in the Cherokee Nation at that time, just a few scattered over a wide area. For example, every settlement didn't have a church but there would be one somewhere in each section of the country in some settlement. You could go to it if you wanted to, even though you were not from that settlement. By 1880, though, there was a church in every settlement. But in 1859 there were just a few in different areas, probably not more than a dozen or so. The Big Shed was the original church in the Nation and a man by the name of Hummingbird was the main deacon of that church and a leader of the reorganization.

The second place the fullbloods met was down at what they called the Old Talonteeskee Council Ground where the Arkansas Cherokees used to meet. That wasn't Baptist country in that section. Anyhow, they chose those two places to meet to try to organize. They organized the way they had during the removal. Each settlement sent their little captain to the meeting and they elected three head captains for each Cherokee district. The whole society didn't elect any head captain, they elected a head chairman. Although they sometimes called him the head captain, his title was really head chairman. They made something like a constitution at that meeting. Their constitution said that war was coming and it seemed as though the Treaty Party people were trying to get them involved in that war, but they wanted the Cherokee people to remain neutral. (If they had to take sides, the Ross Party, who were the main body of the Cherokee tribe, would be for the Union because the treaty was with the Union and they didn't want to go against the treaty.) They had to organize to be more alert and at the
disposal of Chief John Ross in case an "emergency" came. The other thing they were organizing for was to revive the old Cherokee values, cooperation and sharing together and those kinds of virtues. They called their organization the Ketaowa Society, our old name from God, our religious name. The fullblood Cherokees organized the Ketaowa Society to be watchful and to revive that old time value of sharing, the base of the Seven Clan Law.

When the Civil War started up the Cherokees were kind of cut off. They had Arkansas bordering them, which was a Confederate state, and the other four tribes of the Five Civilized Tribes, who also sided with the South. The Cherokees held out neutral for a long time, but after the war started it looked like that if they didn't sign a treaty with the Confederacy, the Confederate troops would just occupy them. When the Confederate troops began massing at Fort Smith, Arkansas, the Cherokees signed a treaty with the Confederacy. The Cherokee Nation raised two regiments. One was called the Second Cherokee Mounted Rifles, which was Stand Watie's men. In fact, Stand Watie already had it organized when the Nation signed the treaty with the South. The Treaty Party or halfbreeds had organized a lodge called the Knights of the Golden Circle which was a sessionist lodge that was all over the South, so they were ready. The Ross Party people, or traditional fullbloods, had organized the Ketaowa Society so they were ready also. Their regiment was the First Cherokee Mounted Rifles. It was easy to raise those two regiments, but Ross didn't want to mix them up because he knew they couldn't get along. So the Cherokees formally declared for the South, made a treaty, and raised two regiments to fight against the Union. Now the Indians didn't like this much but they didn't know what to do about it. They figured that Ross was doing the best he could. The Indians really wanted to remain neutral and if they had to make a choice between the North and the South they would rather declare for the

North for the reason that they thought the whites were more civilized. Before slavery, the whites weren't slaves owners, so they didn't think as the

The Creek Indians, one chieftain, had no intention to fight. They had left a road to Opothleyo. Anyway, he caught the Mountaineers who helped the whites to fight. The Arkanso Indians didn't sided for the Union, so they didn't join them. They joined the Indian Alliance, a Most
North for a number of reasons. One reason was the treaty with the federal government. They wanted to keep the treaty and go with the North. Another reason was that they didn't like Georgia people and didn't want to fight for them. It was the Georgia white people who had really persecuted them before the removal. Another reason was that a lot of Indians didn't like slavery. Some Indians did have slaves. My family had slaves but my family weren't Baptists. The Treaty Party were just like any other plantation owners and slave holders in the South, so they declared for the South, just as the white plantation owners in the slave states did.

The first engagement that the Cherokee troops got into was with the Creek Indians. The Creek Nation had declared for the South but there was one chief named Opothle Yahola who lived around Eufaula to whom the traditional Creeks looked to for leadership. He declared that he wasn't going to fight for the South and break the treaty. He took his followers and left and headed north. Opothle Yahola and John Ross were good friends and Opothle Yahola couldn't understand John Ross declaring for the South. Anyway, the Confederates sent troops to turn Opothle Yahola back. They caught him west of Tulsa and when they did, a lot of the First Cherokee Mounted Rifles deserted. They weren't going to fight Opothle Yahola and help those Treaty Party people who, it was plain to see, were becoming whites. They didn't want to help those Confederate white soldiers from Arkansas. They weren't going to help them kill those Creek fullbloods so they just deserted and went on to Kansas with Opothle Yahola. When they got to Kansas, the Union army organized them into what they called the Indian Home Guard and they went back down to the Cherokee Nation.

Stand Watie was a colonel of the Second Cherokee Mounted Rifles but he was finally promoted to general of all the Indian Territory troops. Most of them were Indians - Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and
soon he even had some white people out of Missouri with him. I think he had a regiment of white Texans under his command, too. He was the last Confederate general to surrender. Kirby Smith was the Confederate general for the West and Stand Watie’s regiments were attached to him. The Cherokees were a separate republic with treaty relationships to the South. When they fought for the South, they fought as allies. Now this meant that the only person who could surrender for Stand Watie was Stand Watie. When those Indian Home Guards went back into Indian Territory, the southern Cherokee families went to Texas and stayed there until after the war and then kind of struggled on back. But they spent most of the war down on the Red River in Texas. Some of those southern Cherokees never did come home. After the Civil War they moved out into west Texas and became big cattle ranchers. Their great grandchildren are still out in that country.

When the Cherokee Home Guards went back into the Indian Territory, they "captured" John Ross and took him back to Kansas, along with the remainder of the First Cherokee Mounted Rifles. They officially captured him but he was still their chief. From Kansas Ross went to Washington D.C. to talk to President Lincoln and explain the situation. He told Lincoln that the Cherokees had been like a drowning man in a flood who grabs at a log as it comes by. That was what the treaty with the South was like. Ross had sent messages to Washington then, but he hadn't heard anything. All he knew was that the Confederates were about to occupy the Cherokee Nation. Lincoln promised him in front of witnesses that the treaty the Cherokee Nation made with the South would never be held against them, but Lincoln died right after the Civil War and the other officials did not keep his promises.

The Civil War was really, in some ways, an excuse for the Cherokees to have their own civil war. Stand Watie was raiding around everywhere and burned the local troops in the area. Watie had to turn to the Creek Nation for help. Diseases hit the Cherokees and Creeks worse than the Southerners. The Creeks were on the frontlines of the battle and fought against the white men. But the Creek warriors were not as tough as the Cherokees and they were conquered by the white soldiers. Ross eventually died in the war and was buried in a military cemetery.

The Cherokees were left in a state of poverty and it took them years to recover from the war. They had to rebuild their homes and farms, and they had to rebuild their culture after the loss of so many people. The Cherokees were a resilient people and they continued to struggle against the odds. They continued to fight for their land and their way of life, and they never gave up. They are an inspiration to all people who have faced trials and adversity.
and burning down the countryside. The Creek and Cherokee fullbloods had to move their families and bunch up around Ft. Gibson for protection. Disease would sweep through those camps every year and many people died. The fullblood Cherokee population was almost cut in half. Some of the Creeks took scalps after the battles and gave the Union Indians a bad reputation. The old Cherokees used to say that during that war the Creeks would almost run over you during a battle trying to get up to the front, then they would run you over again coming back the other way.

By the time the war was over, there wasn't anything left of the Cherokee Nation. Chimneys were all that was left standing. Stock was all driven off and houses were burned. The people were living in rock cliff shelters, tents, and anything else they could find. Of course, the southern Cherokees were all down on the Red River then.

Stand Watie surrendered and John Ross was old by this time. When Ross came back from Washington he met with the Union officials but they wouldn't recognize him. They wouldn't recognize Lewis Downing either. Lewis Downing was the head Baptist preacher of the Cherokees; he was the head captain of the Ketowa Society and he was colonel of the Cherokee troops who fought on the Union side. The only Cherokees the government officials recognized were the southern Cherokees. The officials from Washington drew up a treaty and had them sign it, and they signed away the biggest part of the Cherokee land. The same thing happened with the Creeks. The biggest part of the Cherokees had fought for the Union under Lewis Downing and the biggest part of the Creeks fought for the Union under Opothle Yahola. John Ross told the officials that he had lost all his property and had a son killed in the Union army. Still they told Ross that he was disloyal to the Union. But anyhow, the Treaty Party, the southern Cherokees, sold us out again.
A man by the name of Bill Ross, John Ross's nephew, said that the two parties were never going to get along and that the best thing to do would be to divide up the Cherokee Nation and give the part west of the Grand River to the Southern (Treaty) Party and the part east of the Grand River to the Union Indians. The area east of the Grand River is in the Ozarks and it is poor country. Bill Ross was willing to give the best land to those southern Cherokees so they could become a separate nation and go their own way. Lewis Downing said not to do it but to try to heal that breach. The Cherokees listened to him because Bill Ross was still a young man and Lewis Downing was a head man. Of course, the Treaty Party people finally did it again around 1900 and proved Bill Ross to be right. They should have divided the Nation and let those people go their own way.

After the Civil War was over the Nation was in bad shape and you couldn't even travel without being robbed. A whole new generation of Stalls had grown up and were pillaging the countryside. The James brothers and the Youngers were all down there with them. A lot of Missouri irregulars who had been in Stand Watie's army just stayed around in there, also. There were many orphans for the first time in the Cherokee Nation. They traveled the countryside looking for their relatives. There were a lot of old people left alone with no one to care for them. Food was scarce and housing was in short supply.

The Cherokees decided to have a big meeting at a place they called Salt Springs where they used to make salt. All the head captains of the Ketoowa Society met there and they picked out some men to fast. After these men had fasted, they came back with a message from God. They said, "In two generations from now the Cherokees are going to enter out time of greatest struggle." (I guess that was our third calamity. They didn't say that then, but it was true.)
say that but I think that is what it was.) They said, "The Cherokees are going to be like a young colt without a mare. The people will panic and won't know quite what to do. At that time a leader will arise who is the son of one of the men here, Pig Smith." Pig Smith was an officer in the Union army. I think he was an advisor to Lewis Downing. He was older than Lewis Downing and was a good friend of Opothle Yahola and knew a lot of war medicine. He had been a captain in the old Arkansas Cherokee days. In the Civil War times, even though he was an old man, he was head medicine man for Lewis Downing. The man who had the message said, "Pig Smith's son is going to be the leader in that time of trouble." He was a young man at that time and his name was Redbird Smith. Right then and there they appointed a Natchez Indian by the name of Creek Sam to teach him. Sam spoke Cherokee, Creek, and Natchez. The reason they appointed him to teach Redbird Smith was because the Natchez were powerful in Indian medicine. He stayed with Redbird Smith until he died, sometime around 1810, when he was an old man.

The messengers also said, "The Cherokees will come through that time of darkness but they will live from that time on for two more generations as captives like the Jews in Babylon. That will be the time of the Cherokee's Babylonian captivity but in four generations, (this was about 1868) there will be a great snake rise up in the west and start to swallow the world." They also prophesied that pretty soon the Cherokees would come into prosperous times and it would be two more generations before calamity would befall the Cherokees again and bring about that time of darkness. Redbird Smith would rise up to lead the Cherokees through this but after that time of darkness they would live as prisoners until the fourth generation when the snake would wake up in the west and start to swallow the world. Nowadays the old people say that great snake means
that there won't be any rules or anything. People will marry their
relatives and all different nationalities, men will marry men and women
will marry women, and people will just do anything. There won't be any
rules for anything. That's what they say that prophecy means. It is like
that in California now, it is starting there in the west.

As they prophesied, the Cherokees pretty soon came into good times.
They rebuilt and began to prosper again and the Ketoowa Society pretty
much controlled the Cherokee Nation. They really picked out, by medicine,
who was to be the candidates and the Indians voted for them so that the
councilmen were usually officers of the Ketoowa Society and on the national
council also. It went on that way for about twenty years.

A lot of people, both white and Indian people, do not understand that
the Cherokee Nation was an independent republic in those days. We weren't
on a reservation with our affairs managed by the federal government, and
with a tribal government of limited power. We were our own boss then.
We had a real government that made real decisions, just like any other
government in the world. We didn't have any federal law or federal courts
over us. Our courts settled all disputes for the Cherokees. We had a
national newspaper, the Cherokee Advocate, in Cherokee and English. Our
schools used Cherokee texts as well as English. Our school system was
one of the best in North America. We were better educated than our white
neighbors, and in two languages. It was the fullblood Cherokees who were
mainly responsible for this progress. The fullbloods controlled the destinies
of the Cherokee Nation all through this period. The last fullblood chief
of the Nation was Dennis Bushyhead, but the halfbreeds, the blacks, and
the white people got together and finally overpowered him.

Of course, the Cherokees in this time had to be on guard all the time
to keep the United States from inching in on them and taking away some of

the Cherokees. At Fort Smith, the beginning of the 1870's, the
noted abolitionist, L. O. Howard, was a prominent member of the
protection movement who had strongly opposed the allotment of land,
and was a friend and advisor to a number of his fellow Cherokees.
When L. O. Howard was killed in a duel at Fort Smith in 1872, he
shocked the entire nation. His death was the result of a long
trial involving the killing of one Indian by another. The trial
at Ft. Smith was a very sensational case, and the whole case
turned against the Indian defendant. The jury was composed
of whites, and the Indian defendant was portrayed in a very
negative manner. The only Indian witness who was heard in the
case was a young Indian boy who testified against his own
people, mainly because he was given a new blanket of the United
States government.

At the time, the Cherokees were not aware of the story of
the trial. They had been occupied with their own affairs and
their preparations for a new life. But they knew that L. O. Howard
was a friend, and that he had not died in vain. His death had
galvanized the Cherokees into action. They knew that they had
a strong ally in L. O. Howard, and that they must continue to
fight for their rights.

The Cherokees fought for their independence and their rights,
and they were successful. They maintained their independence
and their way of life, and they were able to keep their land.

The Cherokees were a proud people, and they were determined
to hold onto their land and their way of life. They knew
that they had a strong ally in L. O. Howard, and that they
must continue to fight for their rights. They were successful,
and they were able to keep their land and their way of life.
the Cherokees' independence. There was a famous case of that in the 1870's. It is called the Going Snake Courthouse fight. There was a noted gunfighter and lawman in those days, Zeke Proctor. The old Cherokees say that Proctor had a guardian spirit that warned him of danger and protected him in event of trouble. One of Proctor's enemies was a white man married to an Indian woman. I think his name was Chesterton and he was a bad actor. But Chesterton had become a Cherokee citizen by way of his marriage. One time Proctor was riding by Chesterton's house. Chesterton was in the yard and his wife was standing in the doorway. When Proctor rode by, Chesterton took a shot at him and missed. Proctor drew his gun and shot back over his shoulder. He missed Chesterton but he shot and killed Mrs. Chesterton, standing in the doorway. The Cherokee law arrested Proctor. He went along peacefully. They were having his trial at the Going Snake Courthouse. In the meantime, the federal court at Ft. Smith, Arkansas sent a posse of marshals into the Cherokee Nation to get Proctor. When the Cherokees saw the posse coming they recessed the court. The judge, jury, Proctor, and the spectators got their guns and fought it out with the marshals. Several were killed on both sides and the posse went on back to Arkansas. Washington later ruled that the marshals were breaking the treaty and that the Cherokees were in the right.

Later on, Issac Parker, the famous "hanging judge" presided over the Ft. Smith court. Generally, the Cherokees didn't like him. They felt like he didn't try very hard to keep the white intruders out of the Cherokee Nation. But Parker sure cleaned out the Indian Territory of white outlaws later on in the 1880's and 90's. He must have hung forty or more and put the fear of God into the rest of them.

The Cherokees had to keep alert in those days, but all in all life was pretty good for the Indians. In fact, I think this was kind of our "golden age."
Now there were signs all along that bad times were coming. For one thing, the railroads started coming into the Cherokee Nation. The Cherokees didn't like the railroads coming through the Indian Territory but they couldn't do anything about it because that treaty after the Civil War called for railroads to come through if they wanted to. The railroads didn't get any land like in some states, but they got the right of way. Railroad towns sprang up there. They were bad places because there was no United States law in there, just Indian law and Indians couldn't arrest white people.

Indian law didn't operate like white law anyway. For one thing, Cherokee sheriffs didn't like to carry a gun but had a number of other things they depended on. If they were going to arrest regular outlaws, of course, they would go get their guns and use the war medicine on those outlaws, but generally they didn't carry guns. Even back in the old country the first light horse company didn't carry any guns or knives. They had the respect of the people.

I had a relative who was high sheriff of the Illinois District. His name was William Young and I asked his son one time why his father didn't carry a gun when he was sheriff. His son said, "For one thing, the Cherokees didn't like to use guns on one another, it wasn't right to do that." He said, "For another thing, my father always said it was bad lawmen who made bad men. They usually made them out of young men. If they had been handled right, they would not have turned into outlaws. My father said that if you saw some boys drinking and shooting off their pistols and if you went over there with your gun on, those boys would want to try you out. And that would just make outlaws of them right then."

So those outlaws and those railroad towns were pretty bad at that time. I asked my grandfather how people managed in those railroad towns and he said that they just did anything they were big enough to do. Now this happened
The thing that really got to the Cherokees happened in 1888. For the first time the halfbreeds took over the Cherokee government. These halfbreeds were sons of the old Southern Party and grandsons of the old Treaty Party. In that time they were called the halfbreeds. They had a political party they all belonged to called the Downing Party. Cherokees called it the Disappearing Party, meaning that the halfbreeds were out to do away with the Cherokee ways and make the Cherokees disappear. This election scared the Cherokees. The Ketaowa Society met in extra session right after the election of 1888. They made a law that the Ketaowa Society had to reform and become both a political and religious society at that time.

Of course, in the 1890's, the halfbreeds were changing everything. Cherokee schools were bilingual, in both Cherokee and English. The halfbreeds did away with that so that there was only English in the schools. The Cherokees didn't like it. When the white settlers started drifting into the Nation, the Cherokees knew that the halfbreeds wouldn't hold. The Dawes Commission came down from Washington and tried to get the Cherokees to dissolve our Nation and allot our land out to each individual Cherokee, but those halfbreeds remembered what had happened to their grandfathers when they signed away Cherokee land. They held on the allotment. Of course, they also lived good in the Cherokee Nation. They held for several years, because, in part, they were afraid of those Indians and they were in a bind. They were proud to be Cherokee citizens by blood. They were proud of the Cherokee accomplishments, but they believed in the white man's notion of "progress", too. They couldn't stand in the way of "progress". Now the Indians knew after the Dawes Commission came in there that the halfbreeds wouldn't hold out for long and that this would be the time of darkness that was prophesied.
Therefore, all the Katoowa leaders met together, all the head captains. They picked a committee of seven men with Redbird Smith to head it. There was Will Bark, Ned Bullfrog, Dekinney Waters, Girty, and two others. They were all respected men among the Cherokees. It was to be the committee's duty to get back what the Katoowa people had lost. The leaders felt the Cherokees were down at the bottom of a hill in a dark hollow because they had strayed away from what God meant them to do.

The first thing Redbird Smith and the committee did was to get those wampum belts. John Ross's son, Bob Ross, had them. John Ross always kept them because he was the chief. Ross was old when he died and nobody thought about them. Bob Ross just kept them. He gave them over to the Committee and the Cherokees started to interpret them. They took the belts around to the Creeks, Shawnees, and Delawares and asked them what they knew about them, what those figures symbolized about the Seven Clan Law that the Indians were supposed to go by. Remember, the Cherokees had lost a lot of traditional knowledge because in the removal they lost a lot of old men. Now they had written down the medicine prayers, but they still lost a lot of knowledge. Slowly they began to gain it back.

Then some of the Indians started dancing again. After the Cherokees came west, they didn't make any stomp grounds, they just had dances around at people's houses. They would make a fire in the yard and then dance. By the end of the Civil War, they didn't have any dances any more. They quit because conditions were too disorganized. A lot of people under thirty in the 1890's had never seen those dances and didn't know what they were. I had a friend of mine tell me the first time he saw a dance, it scared him. He said that he heard those turtle shells rattling and those Indians whooping and he thought they had gone crazy.
Then the Natchez started their fire up again. The committee began to meet there at that time. Then, they organized all the Five Tribes into what they called the Four Mothers Society. The Four Mothers Society used to meet over in the Creek Nation.

The white settlers kept on coming into the Indian Territory. After 1898, they just poured in. My grandmother said that the Cherokee ladies felt sorry for them. She said they saw that those white people coming in from Arkansas didn't have hardly a shirt on that wasn't patched or torn. Their little blond headed kids looked poor and hungry. They would just stand around barefooted with their finger in their mouth. It didn't look as if they had a full meal in their lives. Those white ladies looked old before their time, like they were just worked to death and wouldn't last another year. When those settlers came in, the Cherokee ladies would take food down and leave it someplace around their camp, where those kids would find it. That tells you something about the Cherokees. I don't know when they are going to learn. My grandfather said that those poor, raggedy white people own Oklahoma now and the Cherokees don't have anything. Well, after those settlers started coming in, the federal government authorized a survey of our Nation. The Indians didn't like that survey. They would watch that survey party and then they would go and pull up the survey stakes after the surveyors moved on.

In 1898 Congress passed the Curtis Act. This act did away with the Five Tribes' treaties and their governments and school systems. Now, they would have United States law over them and land allotment. This was to prepare for statehood. The halfbreeds just gave up and started to negotiate.

Conditions really got confused then. The settlers were still pouring in like a flood and there was nothing but federal law then because Congress did away with Indian law. Young Indians started raising heck and a lot
of Indian outlaws started up. That's when you hear about the exploits of the Starrs, the Wickliffe brothers, and Ned Christie. Ned Christie was a respectable Indian family man who was a Cherokee councilman. He became an outlaw after federal law came in. The United States marshals had to blast him out of his house with a nine pound cannon after trying to catch him for seven years. They brought that cannon over from Ft. Smith, Arkansas. They blew his stone house down and killed him. He was like a Cherokee Robin Hood.

In 1902, the Indian Bureau said that if the Cherokees didn't come in to sign up for their allotments they were going to arrest them. Of course, the halfbreeds had already come in and taken their allotments, but the fullbloods wouldn't do it. They sent out a marshal who arrested all the Ketoowa leaders and put them in jail. They signed up. That was supposed to break the Cherokees but it didn't. They still didn't sign up. The white people think that if you get Indian leaders to do something, then all the Cherokees will do it, too. But it doesn't work that way. The reason the leader is following some course of action is because the people wanted it that way in the first place. Officials finally had to go to every house with an interpreter.

When Redbird Smith and the other Indian leaders got out of jail, Redbird Smith decided that the Cherokees needed to start up all the fires again. He put down a fire himself for his home settlement and pretty soon the Cherokees had 22 fires. They were trying to get the Seven Clan Rule back. They started the fires and they had the wampum belts but it didn't seem like it was doing any good.

In 1903 and 1904 the whites were getting ready for the state of Oklahoma and there was a lot of real estate dealers in there. They were just fleecing Indians right and left out of their lands. Of course, the
Chief John Ross (above)

General Stand Watie (above right)

Chief Lewis Downing (right)

Courtesy of Western History Collection
University of Oklahoma at Norman
halfbreeds and the blacks had gone over to the white people by that time. A lot of Cherokee citizens were blacks who were children of slaves of Cherokees. During the Civil War time, the Cherokees were the first people to free the slaves. They freed their slaves way before Lincoln freed the slaves in the United States. They made them Cherokee citizens and after the Civil War the ex-slaves took up land in the Indian Territory. Then, the Cherokees had to hold out against not only the whites but also against the blacks and the halfbreeds.

The Ketoowas got together at a meeting and they had an old man pick out seven men to go fast. The seven went to fast to get a message from God. They fasted for seven days and on the seventh night they fasted, they took a bucket of water with them. You could drink water but you couldn't have anything to eat. They were sitting on this bluff talking and joking and smoking and somebody wanted a drink of water so they passed the bucket over. The thirsty man looked in the bucket and saw that the bucket was empty. They didn't have any water for the rest of the night. When they got ready the next morning to go back, they went to pick up the bucket and they saw that it was full of water. They just threw the water over the edge of the cliff and went on back to the fire. They told the old man that they didn't think they got any message. They said the only thing that happened was that the bucket was empty that night and in the morning it was full again. The old man said that was the answer. It meant that the Cherokee bucket will become empty before it becomes full again. That was the answer they got, that even getting back to that Seven Clan Rule wasn't going to free them from that robbery that was occurring then.
CHIEF JOHN ROSS (above)
GENERAL STAND WATIE (above right)
CHIEF LEWIS DOWNING (right)

Courtesy of Western History Collection
University of Oklahoma at Norman
GEORGE LOWERY, the keeper of Cherokee Tradition.
courtesy of Smithsonian Institute
OPOTHLE YAHOLA

courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute
The Baron Fork in the Cherokee Ozarks (above)

Fullblood Cherokee Judge in traditional hunting coat (right)

Cherokee Council 1889-90 (below)
Intertribal Peace Council of 1843 at Tahlequah, courtesy of Smithsonian Institute
Trail of Tears - 1838-9, courtesy Woolaroc Museum