1979

A History of the True People - The Cherokee Indians - Chapter 4-5

Robert K. Thomas
The Captivity
The state of Oklahoma came into the Union in 1907. After that it wasn't federal law anymore. It was state law. The rich whites just pillaged the Indians. I think there was something like four million acres of Cherokee land allotted and I think that by 1930, there was only 400,000 acres of land left to the Cherokees. Cherokees hardly got any money for the land. They just got robbed and cheated. There were a thousand ways the whites did it. The Cherokees pulled back and just kept on the way they were going and kind of laid quiet. For the prophecy said that you will go through a time of darkness which Redbird Smith will lead you through and after that you will be like prisoners. When you live like a prisoner, you can't do anything about it. You just live your life the best way you can, live quietly and do what you can for your family and neighbors. You keep to yourself and generally that was what the Cherokees were doing. But since 1960, things have begun to change. They are getting good roads through there now. There are many lakes now and tourists are coming in. America is kind of like an anvil coming down on the Cherokees' heads now. The rough Ozark Mountains are not enough protection anymore. It used to be that the Indians could get back out in those hills and live their lives and keep away from whites. If anyone would come around, nobody would know anything. If some white man came up to the door, you couldn't speak English even if you could, or if some stranger would ask you who lives next door, you wouldn't know. But you can't do that now because of all the roads and lakes and tourists and poverty programs and low-cost housing authorities.

For the first time in history the white people are reaching right down into the Cherokee community. Take for example, the Cherokee Housing Authority; that is where you sign up for a low-cost house. A lot of the
older Indians say that it is a trick to get the rest of our land. But, of course, the ladies wanted new houses and the men generally had to go along. Then they had a hard time looking their daddies in the eye. Suppose a Cherokee family gets a new house, but they can't make the payments. They will be evicted and the authorities will try to move another family in. Some Cherokees are mean and they will get an Indian doctor and have him lay down bad medicine in the house. The new family will be afraid to move in. Thus, there will be trouble between father and son, wife and husband, neighbors and kinfolk. This is what the whites are doing now, reaching down into Cherokee life.

The old Cherokees say that our bucket is empty now. They can't take anymore from us. They have already robbed us of everything. We have nothing more. We are without land and it is like we live in a foreign place. The old Cherokees say that the only way we have to go is up now. Our third calamity is about to end and our pail will fill back up and we will start back up again. They say our trail is going to turn back east again like our prophecy said. One of these days, it might be a thousand years, we will have our fourth calamity, our destruction, but on the next day it will be the end of the world.

When I say that the Cherokees learned to live quietly after statehood, I don't mean that nothing happened. What I mean is that the Cherokees were overrun and powerless and therefore had to withdraw within their own communities and live their own life. But a lot of things have happened since 1907.

Right after the state came in there was a period of confusion for the Cherokees. Settlers had just flooded into the Indian Territory between 1920 and 1910 and within a very short time Cherokees were outnumbered by 2 or 3 to one in the areas in which they were living. Even where there was an Indian community there were usually white people scattered
there among the Indian families. The Indians were usually settled along
the creeks, following the old Cherokee pattern of settlement. When the
white people came in they took up most of the river bottoms and the
prairies on the "mountain tops." In the Ozark country you will find large
areas of that plateau that are flat and not eroded. And you have all whites
in these areas. Along some of the creeks there will be mostly Cherokee
households and a few white families. After statehood the Cherokees found
themselves overwhelmed and submerged by whites. And, of course, the
robbery of Cherokee land picked up. Every foot of land in the Cherokee
Nation was allotted to the Cherokee citizens; either Indians, halfbreeds,
or black people who were the descendants of Cherokee slaves. Since every
foot of land was allotted, the thousands of whites coming in had to take
land away from the Cherokee citizens so that they might have some place
to live. Cherokees were very quickly short of resources after the state
came in. There were all kinds of ways in which we were robbed of our land.
There were now county courts. You could bring an Indian into court and
prove he was incompetent and have a guardian assigned for him who would have
power of attorney over his affairs. I knew one lawyer in Sequoyah county
who had 200 Indians for whom he was guardian. He sold all their allotments,
200 of them. I don't know what went with the money. It didn't make any
difference if you could speak English and were educated. If they hauled
you into court you were proven incompetent just by the fact that you were
an Indian and had some land. This was the time when the Cherokees learned
that when strange white people came around, to either sneak out the back
door into the woods or just not answer the door. When I was a youngster,
even in the 30's, if you saw a white man come along with a suit on and
fountain pens in his pocket you just stayed in the house and acted like
nobody was home. You figured something bad would happen to you talking
to those kind of white people.
By the time the state came in, what they call the halfbreed Cherokees were nearly all living in the western part of the Cherokee Nation, west of the Grand River, out of the Ozarks. That was over in the prairie country between the Ozarks and Tulsa, around Vinita and Claremore, Oklahoma. They had moved there to become ranchers about 1870. They had married whites and increased rapidly. That was one of the ways they were able to take over the government of the Cherokees in 1888. Most of their children were married to whites and only the older ones could talk Cherokee. In 1907 I'll bet only the halfbreeds over 60 or 70 could talk Cherokee. By that time the halfbreeds were just like whites.

Will Rogers was a halfbreed Cherokee, 1/4 to be exact. He was born in the 1880's. I think his parents could talk some Cherokee but Will Rogers couldn't talk any. He was like the other halfbreed Cherokees of his age who were white in most respects. He was a fine man but not much of a Cherokee. They tell a story about Will Rogers' uncle. During the 1870's the council had passed a law that allowed whites to come into the Cherokee Nation and work for Cherokees as tenant farmers. Some of the halfbreeds built up huge estates worked by white tenants. Finally, the fullbloods wanted to repeal that law. They were debating the law in the council. W.C. Rogers got up and said, "If this law is repealed my lands will revert to the habitat of the deer and the wolf." One fullblood leader replied, "That is just the reason we want the law repealed. We like the land that way." Those halfbreeds had become so much like whites by that time that they didn't even know how to talk to the Indians. In fact, the only way the halfbreeds were Cherokees was by citizenship and political loyalty. So when the state came in, they integrated with the white population. Since they were well off and had a higher level of education than most of the incoming whites, they integrated in on a pretty high
level in the newly forming Oklahoma white society. The Cherokee halfbreeds became pretty powerful in the state of Oklahoma and most of the Five Civilized Tribes' halfbreeds took the same route.

After the state came in, some Cherokee communities let their fires go out. In 1902 there were about 22 fires but by World War I, there were only 14 so they lost eight of them. Now this doesn't mean that Redbird Smith and the other leaders were asleep during this time, because they weren't. They kept on trying to get back to the Seven Clan Rule and revive more and more of the old Cherokee Law. By the time Redbird Smith died in 1918, the old Indians say the rule was complete. They said that they had gotten back the Seven Clan Law. I don't agree with that because some things were lacking. We never revived the main ceremony that God gave to help us, the Green Corn Dance, Ani Gohuski. Those songs and rituals were our strongest medicine for making peace among the people. But most of the old Cherokees thought the rule was completed then. During the last few years of his life from about 1914 on, Redbird Smith was trying to figure out some way that individual Cherokees could put their lands together into one boundary so that they could have something like small reservations, but he wasn't successful.

When World War I came along, the Cherokees were now citizens of the United States and not an independent people. A lot of Cherokees volunteered for the army and most of them registered for the draft. There was only one spot of trouble and that was with a family by the name of Christie. The Christies were old time traditional Indians and they were pretty put out with the United States for breaking the treaty, plus everying else. They were all descendents of, or kin to, Ned Christie. Now Ned Christie, as I mentioned before, had been a Cherokee councilman and who, from the Cherokee point of view, had been driven into becoming an outlaw by the persection of fed.

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of federal marshals when federal law came in. Therefore, the Christies were pretty hostile and they still are. They wouldn't register for the draft and the Cherokees had some trouble because of that.

Two things happened during World War I that shocked the Cherokees. One was that Redbird Smith died and the second was that a big flu epidemic killed a lot of Cherokees. These two things caused a lot of fires to go out. There was nobody of Redbird Smith's stature who could take his place. And the flu killed a lot of people. Some communities got discouraged and just let their fires go out. All the time the Baptist churches were coming back stronger and people were going back into the church, although some communities had both a fire and a church during that period. In some places they had closed their Baptist churches and started their fires in 1902. But because of Redbird Smith's death and the flu epidemic, they let their fires go out and opened their churches again.

After Redbird Smith died, the Katoowa Society didn't just fold up. In fact, they undertook, in the 20's, a self-help program. They got some of their allotments mortgaged, they formed a bank; and then they bought some land, held in common, so the Society could run cattle. But that effort came to a very disastrous end. The old Indians say the whites stepped in and stopped them.

After that more fires went out and some fires became independent. The old Natchez fire became independent from the Katoowa Society. The Christies pulled out of the Katoowa Society and went over into the Creek Nation and joined in with some of the Creeks around Hannah, Oklahoma. Those Creeks had tried to keep up the Four Mothers Society, which had been formed in the 1890's by Redbird Smith, but they were losing ground. The Christies went over and tried to give it a shot in the arm. Another
fire up north of Tahlequah became independent. It is called the Seven Clan Fire. Those Cherokees are hard chargers. Losing some of their land and money in that bank didn't deter them though. They keep on trying to start up some kind of local co-ops even today.

One of the things that was happening in the 1920's and 1930's I don't quite understand. It was that, during this period, a lot of the Cherokee social life kind of played out. Cherokees used to be great for playing cards. I know when I was just a little kid, people would sit out in the yard on a quilt in the shade and play cards and gamble. They used to be great for having games and square dances. They were also great for having what they called Cornstalk Shoots, which is where you shoot at bundles of cornstalks with bows and arrows. Most of these things died out in that period. About the only thing left was a marble game the Cherokees play with great big marbles about the size of a cup. It comes down from days before the whites came. A few places still had cornstalk shoots, but they just about let square dancing go, along with card playing and most of the games in most places. A friend of mine says that was because Cherokee life was turning inward. Cherokees were getting pushed down by whites and people under those conditions build up a head of steam inside themselves. Then if you had a square dance where there was any drinking or a game where anybody suspected any conjuring, there would be shooting trouble. So the people just had to drop any frolics or games for fear of the trouble that would come out of it. This was in the 1920's and 1930's.

In the 1930's Oklahoma got hit by both the drought and the depression. That just knocked the Cherokee economy in the head. The Cherokees didn't have much land left anyhow but now they couldn't raise stock or put in...
gardens for quite awhile. They lost their cattle and horses, both riding and plowing horses. By the time the drought and depression were over, people were either on wage labor or welfare. Once you get into wage labor or welfare you can't get off. You can't go back to farming to feed yourself, even if you wanted to because you haven't got any plows or any horses to pull the plows, and so forth. Furthermore, most Indians just lived from payday to payday after that. They didn't have the money to hold them until they could get the land to produce.

When Cherokee farming had gone, what was called gadoogi in Cherokee, the cooperative work efforts disappeared. When I was a kid all the Cherokees in one settlement would go over to one man's house in the spring and help him put in his garden and corn crop and then go on to the next house and so on. The ladies would all come over and cook. The family whose fields were getting plowed would provide all the food. The men worked and the ladies cooked. Also, if you were sick they all would come over and take turns taking care of you and so forth. Most of that cooperative work disappeared during the depression and the drought when the Indians stopped farming. There were about four or five years when you couldn't get in a garden at all. It was just like a desert in eastern Oklahoma with no leaves on the trees and dust ankle deep on the ground. It was bad.

During the depression there was another rash of outlaws in the Cherokee country. This was the time of Pretty Boy Floyd and a lot of other outlaws. Many Cherokees lived in the Cookson Hills, where the Boston Mountains in Arkansas come over into Oklahoma. This region was a famous hideout for outlaws. There used to be a little town called Cookson. You couldn't go into it unless you knew an outlaw there. This wasn't the first time they had outlaws in the Cherokee country, but this time it was mostly white outlaws. There were not too many Indian bank robbers then. To
get into Cookson you couldn't go in a car. You had to walk. In fact, in the 1930's there were hardly any roads in that part of the country at all. It was all horseback or walking country then. Some men still wore their guns on the outside and it was all open range country. There was a lot of rustling going on and it was the old style rustling, not like the modern style. It was kind of like what you see in the movies, but on a smaller scale. By this time, there were some big Texas ranches up in that country although not as many as there are now. The Indian ranchers were all out of business.

Another thing that happened in the 1930's was that Roosevelt became president. With Roosevelt came what was supposed to be a new deal for the Indians. This had some effect on eastern Oklahoma but not as much effect as it had on the rest of the United States. When the Seven Clan Fire north of Tahlequah heard about this "new deal", they were all ready to go. They negotiated with the Indian Bureau for years but could never manage to get the government to help them form any kind of co-ops or anything like that. What the Indian Bureau did do was organize what they named the United Ketoowa Society in the Cherokee country. This was when I was a kid and I remember it. They had big meetings which I didn't go to but I heard about them. They had meetings around Tahlequah and Stilwell, Oklahoma and called for all the fullblood Cherokees to form some kind of organization. They called it the United Ketoowa Band. They organized it like the old Cherokee Nation with so many delegates from each district (the Cherokee Nation was divided into districts), with an elected chief and so forth. It wasn't organized like the old Ketoowa Society. The base for the old Ketoowa Society was the little captains from each community and when Redbird Smith came along they put a fire in each community.
with a chief, a fire keeper, and a modern council. The new United Ketoowa Band was modeled after the old Cherokee Nation's government. It is still going. Here lately, it looks like it might start to be some kind of real organization to help the Cherokees. The Indians have taken it over now so they might be able to make something out of it. When it was first formed, the government organized it. From 1939 on it was just a rubber stamp for the Indian Bureau and then later for rich whites in the "Indian business". That was one of the few things the government did in the Cherokee country.

After World War II the Cherokees began to get a little more worldly. A lot of Cherokees went off to World War II and a considerable number of people had been off in California working for a time. This experience made them a little more worldly. The generation born after statehood were much more unworldly than the Cherokees born before statehood. Before statehood most of the Indians had been involved in the Cherokee government. They might have been on the board of trustees of the schools, or they might have been delegates to Washington, or they had at least been educated in the Cherokee school system. After 1907 the Cherokee educational level dropped way down compared to what it had been before 1907. From 1907 on, the Cherokees were not very well educated or traveled. In the 1940's, though, a lot of people went to California and became a little more worldly than before.

After the war they had a meeting in Tahlequah, which I attended, to consider the Cherokee legal claims against the United States. There was a "white man" there who they called the chief of the Cherokees, but I didn't know we had any chief. I thought that when the state came in that it did away with our government. But I guess that in the late 1930's the United States appointed a chief. He was a banker named Jesse Milam from Claremore, Oklahoma. Anyhow, he was there and the meeting picked out an executive
committee, but they were all white people as far as I could see. They weren't interested in helping the Indians, just in getting that money from the claim. When they started the meeting, some of the Indians got up and started talking in Cherokee. The chief told them that they would have to conduct the meeting in English because they didn't have an interpreter. When he said that, those Indians just left. They weren't going to hold still for that and they couldn't talk English anyhow. They were leaders, maybe 50 years old and on up. John Smith, Redbird Smith's oldest son, talked good English but the rest of the Smiths couldn't talk much English nor could the people from the Seven Clan Fire. The Christies couldn't talk any English and wouldn't even if they could. They all just got up and left. That was the first sign I saw that something was stirring, having a chief and executive committee. I didn't know quite what it was about although I knew that something was happening.

About that same time, around 1948, some of us went over to Muskogee, Oklahoma to talk to Levi Gritts. Levi had been well educated in the old Cherokee Nation schools. He had worked all his life for the Indians and was well respected. One young man asked Levi what the chances were of the Cherokees having something to say about their own affairs and getting their own constitution again. Levi thought that there was too much working against that in these times. We started talking about where we might get some help. I told them that I had heard that there was a new Indian organization, called the National Congress of American Indians, where we might get some help. Levi said that they had already been to eastern Oklahoma and had talked to the "mixedblood aristocrats", as he termed it. We didn't know who he was talking about. He said that that was what they called the rich whites in eastern Oklahoma who were the children on the old halfbreed Cherokees. We were stunned. I asked him why they didn't talk
to the Cherokees. His lips started trembling. He said, "White people have repeated a lie for so long now that everybody believes it. They say that all the Cherokee progress in the old days was due to the efforts of the halfbreed or mixedblood Cherokees; that they had to be the leaders and drag the fullbloods along behind them; that the fullbloods are just like little children and need the whites and mixedbloods to do their thinking for them. But the old people know that it was the fullbloods who made those good laws and built the Nation and we had to fight the halfbreeds and the whites every inch of the way to do it. That lie makes the whites feel like they have the right to rule us now. Nobody is going to come to talk to us. We can't have any say. We would do something wrong. We are too dumb to know what is good for us. The whites have to decide that." We didn't talk very much longer after he said that. We were too heartsick. We just went on back home. I didn't know whether Levi was right or not. But I never forgot what he said.

In the 1950's that part of Oklahoma started to open up. They started to get roads through there and the Army Corps of Engineers started to put in dams. Then the chief named Milam died. The United States appointed another chief named Bill Keeler in 1952. I think he was vice-president of Philips Oil Company then. He took over being chief. I don't think he had ever seen a Cherokee Indian in his life. There was a white man down at Muskogee in the Indian Bureau named Bob Cullum who told me that right after Keeler became chief, he took Keeler in the car and toured around the Indian settlements in the Ozark country. He said that Bill Keeler couldn't believe it. Keeler said that he didn't know there were Indians like that in the Cherokee tribe. He thought all Cherokees were people like himself and it really shook him up. Bill Keeler started to become active in Indian affairs on a national and international level and to do some things in that
part of Oklahoma. As a matter of fact, he had a man named Muskrat, an executive of Philips Oil Company, who was mainly Bill Keeler's man for taking care of the Indian affairs. But Bill Keeler got more and more involved in the "Indian business" personally. He was a very talented and influential man.

By the 1960's eastern Oklahoma was really opening up and Cherokees began to be more active in that time, as was the whole country. I was living in Oklahoma then and we started a newspaper in the Cherokee language. We started a radio program and we put out school books in Cherokee. We published a Cherokee primer so that young Cherokees could learn to read and write Cherokee. We got courses started in some schools to teach Cherokee kids how to read and write in Cherokee. Things were really changing. The Cherokees began to get the idea that whites were not as powerful nor as mean as they once were because, for one thing, the radio and newspaper were going. Another reason they began to think this was because something happened. Up around Kenwood, which is a big Indian settlement, there was a white school teacher who was arrested for fishing in the Tulsa reservoir. He beat the case. That made the Indians think that things were changing and that it wasn't like it used to be. They started fishing in big parties and when winter came they wanted to form hunting parties of maybe sixty men. When I heard about that it scared me. With sixty armed Cherokees out hunting, if a game warden pulled up he would weigh about sixty more ounces by the time he got out of the car because they would just drill him. Some of the cool heads finally talked them into getting a lawyer. While the lawyer was looking into the Cherokee hunting rights, a young fellow named John Chewie got arrested and put in jail for hunting without a license. He sent word to the Indians that he thought they were all going to stick up for one another on this hunting
and they should help him out. He was in jail at the town of Jay, Oklahoma, population 1,200. On the day of Chewie's trial, 400 armed Cherokees walked into Jay. It scared the white people there about half to death. Of course, a lot of those Cherokees couldn't understand much English so it was a very explosive situation. A federal judge in Tulsa sent out an order taking Chewie's case out of county court into federal court. Cherokees generally have more faith in the federal courts than in the state or county courts. That kind of satisfied the "war party" so they went on back home, but it was just a miracle that they didn't burn Jay, Oklahoma to the ground. We finally lost the Chewie case in federal court, but out of that organization for the hunting, the Cherokees formed a permanent organization called the Original Cherokee Community Organization, the OCCO. That was about 1968. They got a grant from a foundation and hired a lawyer and went into a lot of things. But they finally got stamped out.

By this time the powerful whites, with a little Cherokee blood, in eastern Oklahoma began to develop a Cherokee tribal government. They started to get federal money and different programs. They started their own tribal newspaper and radio program. They developed education programs, tourist business, and housing programs. Very shortly they had built a huge bureaucracy at Tahlequah and swamped the little OCCO that only had a little money. The lawyer that worked for the OCCO also helped cause its downfall although he didn't know it. He thought he was helping the Cherokees organize by tightening up the OCCO, but everybody just got mad. You know the Indians always get hung up on white style organization. He should have just let it go on as it was going. Each Cherokee community picked out a delegate in an open meeting to go and represent them at the OCCO council, but the lawyer wanted elections and secret ballots and majority rule. Of course, that just broke the OCCO all to pieces.
One of the things the tribal government did was to tell the Indians that there would be a community council for the tribal government. They were going to let each community select a person for this council. This council would advise the chief and in time it would take over the Cherokee government, so they said. By the time the people caught on that this was a fake out, the OCCO was wiped out. The Cherokee Nation, the tribal government, started hiring a lot of young Indians who could talk good Cherokee and put them to work. As soon as the OCCO faded out, the tribal government forgot all about their own community council. By this time there were loan programs and housing programs and we were getting a hook in us.

One of the things you have to understand about the Cherokee situation is that our membership rolls were closed by Congress in 1907. Anyone who is descended from those rolls is legally a Cherokee. There are thousands of white people who are legally Cherokees. I know people who get Indian benefits who are only 1/256ths Cherokee. Now I don't want anybody to misunderstand me. Most of those people are good people. They simply don't understand the Indians' situation. Some of them would like to help the Indians if they could. They don't see how they are just used and used against the Indians. Even the powerful whites in the tribal government think they are doing right. They think that as they develop all eastern Oklahoma, then the Cherokees will benefit too. But it doesn't work that way.

Congress provided for the election of our chief in about 1971. The Indian Bureau sent out ballots to all those people who had petitioned for a part of the Cherokee claims money in the 1960's. By and large, most of those people lived outside of eastern Oklahoma in Texas, Kansas, California, or in other parts of Oklahoma. Most of them are very little Indian, speak...
no Cherokee, and are, as far as you can tell, whites. Those were the majority of people who voted. The only person they had ever heard of was Bill Keeler so naturally they voted for him. I don't think the Indians even bothered to vote in those elections. The Cherokee tribal government is really the eastern Oklahoma "establishment." It is a loose partnership of oil companies, banks, real estate, building contractors, and tourist developments whose focal point is that tribal government. It just keeps getting more powerful and bigger all the time.

However, the boat is rocking over in the Creek Nation. The Creeks are in primarily the same situation as the Cherokees but they got a decision from a federal court which said that insofar as the Creeks have a tribal government, it must be regulated by the old Creek Constitution. The Creek Constitution calls for a legislature in which representatives are elected from traditional Creek towns. You have to be a member by birth of a Creek town to vote, therefore, unless you have a Creek mother, you are out of luck. The Creeks are moving to take over their tribal government, for whatever good it may do them. The Cherokees have been influenced by that action on the part of the Creeks and have moved to take over the United Keetoowa Band, which was organized in 1939. Those Cherokees might very well upset the apple cart.

Even if the Cherokees do take over our tribal government, I don't know what we will do with it. The Cherokee tribal government serves the needs of powerful whites - to develop tourist resources, government programs, real estate, etc. The chief now is a young man who is 1/8 Cherokee and who is president of the First National Bank of Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He is an able man and sympathetic to the Indians. But he is a white man in all respects. He is a Cherokee only by a quirk of law. He is building up an even larger operation.
Regardless of what seems to be a "bad scene", Cherokees are pretty together. The Cherokees are still a conservative, traditional people. There are still plenty of wild onions in the woods, deer in the hills, and perch in the creeks. The redbud and the dogwood still bloom in the spring. You can still visit your kin and friends at hymn singings and stomp dances. The Oklahoma Ozarks are yet an old timey and faraway and beautiful land.

Cherokees have become more shorn of resources in recent years but income is coming up a little because of new jobs and the general development of eastern Oklahoma; thanks in part to the Cherokee tribal government. Community and family life is still strong. There are no real cracks in the dike yet. And compared to most Indian groups, Cherokees are the exception in terms of having stable, traditional communities.

However, we are at a point in Cherokee history where something is bound to happen one way or another. The old people say that the pail has become empty, that the prophecy has now been fulfilled, and the only way the Cherokees can go is uphill now. That stirring around in the United Ketoowa Band may be an example of that. People are talking about relighting some of their fires again. You hear people talking in some communities about starting up some cooperative help and work again. The Cherokee Baptists are talking about drawing the line on how much English will be used in the Cherokee churches. The old people may be right. But we may be at a fork in the trail for the Cherokees and I think the next ten years will tell the tale in the Cherokee country. Either we will go uphill or we may go downhill further as a people and slide into a period like some other tribes where you have heavy language loss, family breakdown, and so on. But the old people are optimistic. They say that there is only one way to go and that is up.
Cherokee Home of the 1840-1940 period (above)
The Eastern Cherokee Reservation from Clingmans Dome (below)
The Staunch Handful
Now I want to back up and talk a little about what happened to the North Carolina Cherokees. To do that you have to go back before the removal. In 1819 the Cherokee Nation sold a big block of land in east Tennessee which included all the land around where old Echota and old Tellico had been; and in North Carolina, all the land east of the Nantahala River which included the old mother towns of Kitoowhagi and Nikwasi. In Tennessee, most of the Cherokees had already moved down into Georgia so there wasn't too much of a dislocation of people there, but a lot of people had to move out of that country east of the Nantahala over in North Carolina. They moved further west into the Cherokee Nation into extreme western North Carolina or down into Georgia.

Now some people didn't move. According to the treaty of 1819, the United States set aside two reservations of 640 acres each, east of the Nantahala. One was for a chief called Drowning Bear and one was for a chief called Big Bear. Several hundred Indians were living on those two reservations. Those two reservations were fairly close together. One was around Bryson City, North Carolina and one was right south of modern Cherokee, North Carolina. They were really one settlement although they had two different chiefs.

Then there were some towns on the border of the Cherokee Nation. There were two little towns called in English, Judson and Allmond. They were on the Little Tennessee River on the northeast corner of the Cherokee Nation. Then farther south on the Nantahala River was Briar Town. All of these towns were right on the border of the Cherokee Nation. I think some of these Cherokees lived on the American side. Then there was the
big town of Cheoowa which was right north of about where Robinsville, North Carolina is now, near the northern boundary of the Cherokee Nation. There was also a big family group by the name of Ross, relatives of the old chief John Ross, still over in Tennessee around old Echota. As a matter of fact, they never did move down south to the Cherokee Nation. Now all these people were pretty much out of it as far as Cherokee affairs were concerned because to get to many of those places I was talking about, Indians in the main part of the Cherokee Nation had to go over some pretty rough mountains. All of those streams that those people lived on flowed into the headwaters of the Little Tennessee. The main Cherokee population was south of there, over on the drainingage of the Hiwassee River or on the Coosawattie and Etowah in Georgia. So they were pretty isolated from the Cherokee affairs and the rest of the tribe.

When the false treaty of New Echota was signed in 1835 calling for the removal of the Cherokee Indians, William H. Thomas, a white man who had trading posts in nearly all of these towns I was talking about, became the agent for those Cherokees; to see if the people of those towns could be exempted from the removal. The people living on the Big Bear and the Drowning Bear reservations probably could not have been removed. They were North Carolina citizens. But for the people living on the borders, it was not such a clear case. Thomas was an orphan and he had been adopted as a young boy by Drowning Bear and had been raised by him. Thomas spoke good Cherokee. After he got in his teens, he got apprenticed out to a white man who had a trading store among the Cherokees. Thomas learned the business and when he became an adult, he opened a chain of trading stores of his own and became rich and a "big shot" in that section of North Carolina. In fact, I think Thomas was in the state legislature at
the time he was also acting as agent for those Cherokees. He was in Washington most of the time between 1836 and 1843 trying to get those Cherokees exempted from the removal; that is, the Cherokees in those six little towns. In the meantime, while negotiations were going on, the removal came.

Now the troops didn't bother the people on the Big Bear and Drowning Bear allotments. This was in 1838. The Drowning Bear allotment had been abandoned and the people had moved up to the Big Bear farm. There were several hundred Cherokees living on the Big Bear farm right south of Cherokee. When the army started to round up the people in those other towns, some of them fled up into Nantahala Gorge and hid out. Others fled up into the Smoky Mountains around the head of Deep Creek. The people around Briar Town fled east over to the land of a white man who was a friend of theirs. They stayed on his farm west of Franklin, probably thirty miles out of the Cherokee Nation. There were about several hundred of them. Thomas happened to be in North Carolina when all this was happening. I suppose he came back during the actual removal.

There was an Indian by the name of Charlie who was being taken with his family to a stockade and, according to the way the story goes, the soldiers were mistreating his wife. He and his boys jumped on the soldiers and killed one of them. Then they took off and fled up into the Smokys. The general in charge of the removal was a man by the name of Winfield Scott. He was a very famous American. He talked with Thomas about the situation and they made a deal that if the Cherokees would turn Charlie in, Scott would cease trying to remove Cherokees in that border area and let Thomas finish his negotiations in Washington. Thomas went to the man who was the leader of that group of Indians who were hiding in the Smokys around Deep Creek. His name was Oochala or Lichen, in English. Lichen is the moss
that grows on rocks that deer eat. Lichen agreed to Scott's terms. Then
Thomas went to see Charlie and his sons. Thomas explained the deal that
had been offered to them. Charlie sat for a long time, looking off.
Finally, he said, "I will come in. I don't want to be hunted down by my
own people, like an outlaw." They surrendered at Bryson City to Scott and
a firing squad of Oochala's men executed Charlie and his older sons. They
left the baby boy alive. Then Scott looked the other way on those refugees
in the Smokys and the Nantahala Gorge and over around Franklin. I don't
think that the people on the Big Bear farm were bothered at all during the
removal because they were North Carolina citizens.

During the 1830's a lot of laws against free colored and Indians came
into being. North Carolina passed a law that no Indian could own land in
the state of North Carolina. Thomas acted as agent for the Indians there
and finally, about 1842, he got the federal government to turn over certain
funds due those people. Every Cherokee family was due a small payment for
what was called loss of improvements - house, stock, and whatever - during
the removal. Also, when North Carolina passed the law that the Indians
couldn't own land, those two reservations were taken away. I don't think
anyone actually went and confiscated them but they were no longer in Indian
title. So the government paid Thomas for loss of improvements due those
people plus money for the loss of those two reservations, since they had
been set aside by treaty. He took those funds and bought what was called
the Qualla Boundary, where the Cherokee reservation is now, plus some land
around Judson and Allmond and some land for the Cherokee people over west
on Snowbird and Buffalo Creeks, near Robinsville, North Carolina. Thomas
had to hold the title to these lands in his name, since Indians couldn't
own land in North Carolina in those days. Some of the North Carolina
Cherokees say that their families gave Thomas their own personal money and
gold nuggets to help buy that land. By 1843 the Indians had land and
were settled down pretty much. Every year they gave Thomas money to
pay the taxes on the land. They weren't as disorganized as you might
think.

Those North Carolina Cherokees were good farmers in those days.
They were better farmers than we were out in the Indian Territory. We
still depended on the wild game a lot out there. Of course, the wild
game was about played out back east. But those eastern Cherokees were
making their living from farming then, and even up until recent times.
If you go to North Carolina now you can see their old fields all over the
mountainsides. They lived good and prospered in those days.

I think the main story is that just random Cherokees fled up into
the Big Smokys during the removal, but this was not the case. They were
nearly all from the little Cherokee towns and kin groups in that area.
Now the people who were residing west of Franklin on the Siler farm, called
Sandtown, didn't come up on the Qualla Boundary until sometime about 1850.
Most of them settled at Big Cove, Kalonuyi (Raven Place) in Cherokee. How-
ever, there had been some people from Georgia who had come up there to
Sandtown earlier. And there were some other Georgia people who straggled
in later to Qualla in the 1850's but not very many. I think that the ones
who came up there had lived in that area before 1819. They had moved into
Georgia in 1819 and when the removal came they just fled back up to their
original homes. The removal came only about 20 years after the sale of that
country in 1819. I do know that the Owl family at Cherokee came up from
Georgia then, and that the Bushyheads came from Alabama. A few Cherokees
walked all the way back from the Indian Territory. That's where Cherokee
names like Going Home and Going Back come from.
Most of the North Carolina Cherokees are the original people in that area and they speak the old Cherokee dialect of that region, which is a pure and a distinct Cherokee dialect. People over around Robinsville speak like Oklahoma people, but those over around Cherokee speak the old mountain dialect. However, even today, there are quite a few people down in north Georgia and Alabama who are the descendants of Cherokees who got left behind during the removal. A few of them came up to Qualla, over the years, and settled down there. Most of them just stayed down there and became whites with a little Indian blood in them.

When the Civil War came along, the eastern Cherokees went into the Confederate army. Thomas was not much of a Confederate sympathizer but he had to do something with the Indians. He was afraid they would get in a bad place so he organized them into what they called the Thomas Legion. They were mostly Home Guards. There was one small group of about a dozen who deserted and went into the Union army and when they came home they brought smallpox with them. It killed off a lot of Cherokee people. These Cherokees were captured and then they went into the Union army. But before that they were in a prison camp. They said they were taken into a room where a white man showed them a red spotted fish in a glass bowl and that is where they got the smallpox from. I don't know whether that story is true or not, but the eastern Cherokees came out of the Civil War with a big population loss because of that smallpox.

By this time, Thomas was getting old and his mind was getting childish. In fact, there were times when he couldn't remember English. He could only remember Cherokee and he had to have an interpreter to talk English. His affairs were getting into a bad place and his creditors were beginning to move in on him. All that Cherokee land was in his name so that at his death
in 1868, all his creditors moved in on his estate. The United States
took up the cause of the eastern Cherokees and sued for them. They got
the land title transferred to the Cherokees. The Eastern Band of Cherokees
also had some money which was due them by virtue of the treaty of New
Echota. They got some of that money and paid off the claims to Thomas' estate. Then they bought some more land with the surplus money. Some
way, though, that land around Judson and Allmond got lost and those people around there trickled up to Cherokee, family by family, around 1900.
The people living over in east Tennessee, the Rosses, were getting pressed because the country there was filling up. They came up to Cherokee, North Carolina about 1880. Then from there a whole bunch of them moved out to the Cherokee Nation in the 1880's. Their chief was John Ross, a distant relative of old chief John Ross.

In the 1870's the eastern Cherokees met and elected a head chief, Lloyd Welch. They adopted a formal constitution to regulate their affairs. In 1889 they incorporated under the state of North Carolina and became the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Inc. They had to live under state law. North Carolina repealed that law about Indians not being able to own land in 1866 and they were supposed to be full citizens by 1889. They had to pay taxes on their land and abide by the state of North Carolina laws. The federal government did have an agent down there off and on. The Indian Bureau finally put up a school in the 1890's because in this mountain section of North Carolina the counties were poor and the schools provided the Indians were pretty bad. So the government did put up a school, but I think that generally they didn't do too much for the Indians.

In 1924 the United States offered to take over the Cherokee land in trust. The Cherokees were agreeable because the land taxes were pretty heavy. They were heavier than normal because the Indians were an incorporated
They also had to pay for dog licenses, and they didn't like the state of North Carolina law that said that they had to pen up their stock. The government took over the land in trust in 1924 and it became pretty much like any reservation except that they were still under the state of North Carolina as far as criminal law went. Then in the 1930's the Cherokees reorganized their government and became like most regular Indian reservations.

At the time of the removal, those North Carolina Cherokees were for the most part old timey and traditional people. After the removal, they had one fire close to Cherokee on Noco Creek and they had one around Robinsville. After the main body of the Indians were driven out to the Indian Territory they didn't make any fires there until about 1902 when they started them under Redbird Smith, but the North Carolina people kept their fires going on Noco Creek and at Cheowa. The one on Noco Creek lasted until after the Civil War. The one down at Robinsville, the temple and dance house, lasted until World War I. I don't know whether they used it or not that late, but the building was still up by World War I. By 1870 their fires had either gone out or were going down. However, they still kept trying to keep up their ceremonies. The last real ceremony, the last Green Corn Dance, our major ceremony, was held at the township of Big Cove about 12 miles from the Cherokee in 1902. The old Cherokees say that was the last real ceremony and all the other settlements sent delegations to Big Cove for the dance. After that there was never any Green Corn Dances for the whole reservation. People in Big Cove did keep it up on a small scale and some of the other Indians did hold all night stomp dances. But there were no more real ceremonies, they were just like frolics. A lot of the religious aspect of those dances got lost from about 1902 on, although the Indians still danced up until World War II; after which they
quit. The Indians still do those dances at their fair in the fall, but they are just for show.

Here lately, the fullbloods down there tried to start a fire and revive the Green Corn Dance but they weren't able to do it. Even though those old Cherokees still know the songs and the ritual, there was just too much pressure. They are just a little island of Indians in a sea of whites with no other Indians anywhere around. And they have got this huge Indian Bureau that towers over them like the shadow of Baal all the time. Whites in that region are not very friendly to Indians and they are not very educated or worldly people. They still think Indian ways are pagan and backward so the Cherokees in North Carolina live under a lot of pressure. And they have become kind of disorganized in recent years. With this pressure and with their own trouble in organizing, they failed to start up the ceremonies again, but they may later on.

Up until 1902, they were strong in keeping up the old Cherokee religion. But after that they had a lot of difficulties. In 1930 the Smoky Mountain National Park was established. There wasn't too much development until after the World War II, but after that that area became one of the major tourist areas in the United States. Those old Indians figured whites would never bother them way back up there in the mountains, but it is one of God's jokes on the Cherokees that this region became one of the most attractive parts of the country, just because it was so out of the way and primitive. It became one of the largest tourist areas in the country. The Eastern Cherokee reservation is supposed to be a showplace for Indian tourist development, but the Indians feel that they are exploited. They feel that the reservation is run by rich whites who look out for their own benefit. The Indians do work around motels and restaurants or maybe stand around in front of a shop with a headdress on in the summer. A few young Indians
nowadays who have some education might get to be a salesperson in a shop but most of that big development is owned by outsiders. Some people with a little Cherokee blood own a few small shops and motels. Frontier Land and Santa Claus Land and all those big developments drive the old Indians crazy. Little trains hoot around and sky lifts clang and the old timers grit their teeth a lot. Cherokee, North Carolina is a monument to American bad taste. But nobody has ever lost a penny yet "pitching" to that taste.

Now when the government built that school it was used to "Americanize" those Cherokees. It was a big boarding school. They used to keep those Cherokee kids in there nine months out of a year even though they might live only a mile away. The kids wouldn't even get to see their parents at Christmas. It has had some effect. For instance, there is a lot of language loss in North Carolina. In the average settlement there, you will find about 1/3 of the households are mostly Indian by blood but they don't speak any Cherokee. Maybe some of the older people do, but not anyone else. Maybe people my age might understand and speak a little, but their children don't. Then you have about 1/3 who are what they call white Indians, people from families that have been marrying whites for generations. Some of these families came up from Georgia about 1900. They are very little Indian and, of course, are very much like southern whites. Their associations are primarily with neighboring whites. If any of the "Indians" benefit from the tourist trade, it tends to be those people. Then about 1/3 of the reservation people are really old time Indians and speak Cherokee in the home. Some people don't speak any English at all. They used to have an interpreter for their tribal council because the council members couldn't understand one another. Part of the council spoke only English and part spoke only Cherokee.

There has been more language loss in North Carolina than in Oklahoma but that varies according to which settlement in North Carolina you go in.
I have been talking about the average settlement. There are two settlements, Big Cove and Snowbird down by Robbinsville, that are pretty much all Cherokee speaking people. In Snowbird, the churches are Cherokee speaking, also. Snowbird people remind me of Oklahoma Cherokees. The Big Cove people are old timey Indians too. Their churches aren't in Cherokee but in a lot of ways, in their behavior and their outlook, they are more old timey than most Oklahoma people. They don't have the fire anymore or anything like that but they are old timey in the way they think about things. Parts of other townships are like this, too.

If you look at North Carolina there is every condition there that would cause most social scientists from the outside to figure that these people have got to be just a quivering bowl of psychic jello, mashed to a pudding. There is that huge Indian Bureau and big moneyed interests that make you feel like looking over your shoulder most of the time. There is all that exploitation. There is tremendous pressure to shape up and "modernize." There is a lot of prejudice and discrimination against Indians around there. The Cherokees are scared that the National Park, now on three sides of the reservation, will finally gobble them up. They are sneered at and discounted and ignored as human beings. They, too, live in captivity. All those conditions would make you think that the Cherokees should be in very bad psychological shape, but they are not. They have very stable communities and strong families, except for the language loss which makes for some division within those communities. Even so, you don't see much drinking or much family trouble or the kind of social trouble that you see in many other places. They are pretty far down and a little cowed by their situation, but who wouldn't be! But they are in much, much better shape than their situation would make you predict. There is something about Cherokees, I think, that is hard to crack, as you can probably see from
reading this tale of Cherokee history. An old Cherokee lady once said, "The Cherokee Indians are just like a horse with a hard mouth, hard to turn." I think that is clear. I also think that that poker up our backbone is one of the things that has enabled us to survive in fairly decent social shape.

I know conditions in North Carolina are worse than in Oklahoma. Many of those Indians are dirt poor. They have all those tourists crawling all over them in the summertime, bumper to bumper traffic through the reservation. They see all that money made by business interests in their name. It is just one indignity after another. Exploitation is so complete that nobody bothers to hide it. They expect the Cherokees to be grateful for the fact that they get a few cents of their own money. It is one of the most undignified situations that you can imagine. Yet the North Carolina Cherokees are strong people and have stable families and a rich community life. They still live in those beautiful mountains that God meant for us to cherish and enjoy. It makes me feel certain that if Cherokees can make it even under those hard conditions, that we will indeed, as the old people say, live until the next to the last day of the end of the world.
APPENDIX

I reckon that to be fair to my readers, I should tell you where I got the information that I've put in this history. To begin with, the biggest part of it comes from older Cherokees. When I was little, my great grandmothers, and my grandfather and his brothers, and most of my older relatives used to tell me a lot of stories and take me around and show me the places where the events happened that they had told me about. My family was playing out then and I was one of the few little boys in the family. I guess they were anxious to pass on what they knew and they just focused on me.

When I got older some other elderly men were kind and patient enough to take me under their wings and tell me something - John Smith, George Smith, Stokes Smith, Will Bolin, Eli Pumpkin, and White Runabout in Oklahoma; Will West Long, Arsene Thompson, John Crow, Rob Bigmeat, and Jonah Teesateskee in North Carolina.

Of course, I have tried to put all these stories in a time sequence, like a regular history, but I didn't hear them like that. I put them in an order for this book. And, then, the interpretation is my own. If I have told you something wrong, I am sorry; but, it is sure not the fault of the old people who taught me. If I have told you something that is not so, you can always check it out with the old people in Oklahoma or North Carolina.

I did get some material for this book by reading articles written in the 1800's in the old Cherokee Advocate; articles written by Cherokee experts of that time. And in a few places I have used material from real old history books where they quoted Cherokees directly. But the most of what I have written down comes from my relatives and those men whose names I have listed for you.