

THE CHEROKEES

The first article in a series on the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma focuses on the proud, highly civilized Cherokees and follows them from their native Southeast along the Trail of Tears to the Sooner State

By DR. A. M. GIBSON

WHILE OKLAHOMA is a young state, admitted to the Union in 1907, it is a curious fact of history that the Sooner State's heritage is richer and older than most of the states of the trans-Mississippi West. From about 1820 to 1907, Oklahoma was Indian Territory, a community of five states or nations—the home of the remarkably advanced Five Civilized Tribes (the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creek and Seminoles). Among the leading contributors to this heritage were the Cherokees.

Of Iroquois linguistic stock, the Cherokees called themselves Ani-Yun-wiya, meaning leading or principal people, and their history justifies this claim. The Cherokees were found in early times in northwestern Georgia, western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. In common with the other tribes of the Southeast, the Cherokees were first discovered by the Spanish, then the French, and the British. During colonial times the British had the greatest influence over the tribe, and while British goods, especially firearms, were important in making the Cherokees a powerful nation to be reckoned with in the struggle among the European powers for control of colonial America, of greater significance were British traders who settled among the Cherokees, took Indian wives and produced mixed-blood families. This quickened the Cherokee advance along the road to civilization and produced prominent family names like Adair, Vann, Ward, Fields, Hicks, Chisholm, Ross, Lowry and Rogers. These mixed-bloods were more like their fathers than their Indian mothers; many became prosperous merchants, traders, planters and slave owners, teachers, writers and tribal statesmen.

The manuscripts division in the OU library contains one of the nation's great collections of papers, records, chronicles and photographs of Western history. This archive provides a wealth of material for the student of the West and is the source of these photographs of the Cherokees. At top left is the plantation home of a prominent Cherokee family, the Vanns, in Springfield, Ga. The

Shortly after American Independence, the line of settlement jumped westward into the Cherokee domain, and pressure by the new settlers soon reduced the tribal range to northwestern Georgia. This reduction of territory had the effect of consolidating and unifying the Cherokee Nation as never before. The tribal council directed the construction of a national capitol at New Echota, leading Cherokees established new enterprises and the Cherokee Nation flowered in this unity.

This speed-up in advancement was due to native ability and the mixed-blood influence. But two other developments must receive credit, too. One of these was the missionary influence. Various religious denominations had shown interest and concern for the Cherokee and other Indian tribes of North America by sending missionaries to them. The Moravians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists were the principal denominations serving the Cherokees, and of all the missionaries sent to the nation, none was more outstanding than Samuel A. Worcester. Worcester built schools and churches throughout the nation and encouraged the Cherokees in their upward advance; through his influence, mission school graduates were sent on to academies and colleges in New England. This system of education produced a corps of well-informed, dedicated leaders for the nation and included such big names as John Ross, Elias Boudinot (Buck Watie), Stand Watie, John Ridge, Charles Hicks and others.

The other reason for the remarkable advance of the Cherokee Nation was Sequoyah's discovery. In 1822, after

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tribe was driven from such holdings by the U.S. government in 1838. One of the great chiefs was John Ross (top center) shown here with his wife. The famous Sequoyah is at top right. Stand Watie (lower left) was a Confederate general during the Civil War. At left center is the Female Seminary near Tahlequah in 1851, and at lower right, Chief Tom Buffington addresses a capital throng.



years of hard work, Sequoyah completed his celebrated Cherokee alphabet or syllabary, a system containing 85 characters which reduced the Cherokee language to written form. While many of the mixed-bloods were literate in English, his invention made it possible for the entire tribe, young and old alike, to learn to read and write in the native language in the matter of a few months. While the effect of Sequoyah's syllabary in itself was remarkable in that it made his nation literate almost overnight, it was all the more so because Sequoyah himself was illiterate, his phenomenal invention coming from raw native genius. Sequoyah's gift to his people made them the first Indian tribe in the United States to have a written language.

Spurred by this, the Cherokees advanced even more rapidly. In 1828, the highly-educated Elias Boudinot, with Worcester's help and supported by the Cherokee National Council, established the *Cherokee Phoenix*, America's first Indian newspaper. Printed in both English and Cherokee, the *Phoenix* kept the nation well informed on tribal and United States news.

In 1827, the Cherokees took another step forward when an Indian convention at New Echota wrote a constitution for the nation, another first among the Indian tribes of North America. John Ross was elected Principal Chief by the first election under this constitution.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Cherokees prospered and their ranches, farms, plantations, mills and trading establishments were coveted by the white settlers. Thus great pressure was exerted on the tribe to move west. Actually small bands of Cherokees had been moving west from as early as 1795, and by 1817 a community of about 5,000 Cherokees had settled between the White and Arkansas rivers in northwestern Arkansas. In that year the United States government signed a treaty with the tribe granting to the Cherokees this new domain. All eastern Cherokees who desired to do so were invited to join their brethren in Arkansas.

These western Cherokees opened the wilderness, and with typical energy established towns, plantations and a new government. In no time at all white settlers had pushed up the Arkansas frontier and were pressuring the Cherokees to move on. Thus, in 1828, the Cherokees signed another treaty; by this agreement they surrendered their lands in Arkansas in exchange for a home in the new Indian Territory—a 7,000,000 acre tract in what is now northeastern Oklahoma. This was to be the domain for the Cherokee Nation until Oklahoma Statehood in 1907. The Arkansas Cherokees promptly removed to their new homeland and again set about taming the wilderness.

At least two-thirds of the Cherokee Nation remained in

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the East. The state of Georgia was determined to force them to vacate their historic homeland. Laws were passed by the Georgia Legislature which reduced tribal authority over the nation and brought scorn and shame to the Cherokees. This harassment convinced certain Cherokees, notably among the mixed-bloods, that removal was inevitable and that the tribe should sign an agreement with the United States surrendering their Georgia lands and join their kinsmen in Indian Territory. The leaders of this group were Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot and Stand Watie; they came to be called the Treaty Party. Chief John Ross and most of the full-blood Cherokees were opposed to leaving, the latter primarily because of tradition and their attachment to the lands of their ancestors.

United States commissioners repeatedly attempted to obtain a cession treaty but each time the Ross group refused. Finally at New Echota late in 1835, United States commissioners met with the Treaty Party, comprising a minority of the nation, and got their treaty. This agreement was accepted by the United States as the will of the Cherokee Nation and, over the protests of Ross and his full-blood following, put it into effect. The Treaty Party members left for Indian Territory soon after signing this agreement at New Echota. The treaty allowed the Cherokees until 1838 to wind up their affairs and remove, but

the Ross party remained firm and made no effort to prepare to remove.

The United States government, pressured by the state of Georgia, was determined to carry out the treaty, so during May, 1838, federal troops under General Winfield Scott occupied the Cherokee Nation, rounded up the reluctant Indians and literally drove them from their homes over the western trail to the Indian Territory. Several Cherokees escaped Scott's dragnet, fled to the mountains of North Carolina, and their descendants remain there to this day, a colorful Indian community called the Eastern Cherokees. The Cherokee Trail of Tears was a time of suffering, blizzards, disease, hunger and misery. At least 4,000 died on the trail to their new home in Oklahoma.

The Treaty Party was blamed for this mass suffering and death, and when the survivors arrived in Oklahoma, they vowed vengeance on the signers of the New Echota Treaty. During June, 1839, the signers were struck down by unknown assassins, even the scholarly Elias Boudinot falling before the executioner's knife. Only Stand Watie escaped.

The so-called Cherokee murders triggered a vicious, destructive civil strife in the Cherokee Nation, but eventually the factions fused for the common good. A new constitution was written, civil disturbances quieted and the Chero-

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them from their homes over the western trail to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The Trail of Tears was a time of hunger, disease and death.



kees turned to taming the Oklahoma wilderness, opening up new farms, ranches and plantations, building roads and establishing towns. These are the Golden Years for the Cherokee in Indian Territory. During the years 1840-1861, flatboats and steamers on the Grand, Verdigris and Arkansas tied the Cherokee towns with Fort Gibson, Fort Smith and New Orleans. Under tribal elections, Chief John Ross continued as Principal Chief. The Cherokee National Council passed laws organizing the nation into districts which would approximate present counties. Local government with courts, peace officers and a national body of rangers called lighthorse police kept the Cherokee Nation notably free of lawlessness.

Education leaped ahead, too. Missionaries accompanied the Cherokees west, the most notable, again, being Samuel A. Worcester. Mission schools were set up throughout the nation, and in 1841 the Cherokees established a national public school system—the ancestor of Oklahoma's modern public school system. Indian youth could pursue an education from kindergarten through academy or high school level in the nation; then the top scholars were selected to attend stateside colleges to complete their education. Princeton and other Eastern universities received a number of these outstanding Cherokee students. As a matter of fact, Cherokee schools during the Golden Years far exceeded anything available to white children in the frontier states and territories of Missouri, Arkansas, Texas and Kansas.

THE NEED for a newspaper was felt, and in 1844 the Cherokee National Council established at the nation's capital at Tahlequah the *Cherokee Advocate*, a paper much like the *Cherokee Phoenix* which Elias Boudinot edited at New Echota before removal. Near Tahlequah at the town of Park Hill, Worcester established Park Hill Mission, a center of learning which became a sort of Athens of the American West. Worcester not only taught students at his mission school, but also at the famous Park Hill Press he published books, leaflets and the *Cherokee Almanac*. In addition, Worcester translated the Old and New Testaments into Cherokee and printed this at Park Hill, too.

The Golden Years in the Cherokee Nation came to an end in 1861. Secession and the rise of the Confederacy split the United States on the Ohio River. In the West, states adjacent to the Indian Territory except Kansas went for the Confederacy. Confederate officials were interested in the Indian Territory, especially the Cherokee Nation. Grain, hides, beef, horses, salt and lead produced on Cherokee farms, ranches, plantations and mines made this nation a vital link in the Confederate lifeline. Also its geographic location as a buffer against Union Kansas was important in Confederate planning.

Confederate Commissioner Albert Pike worked hard on Chief John Ross and the Cherokee Council, urging them to join the Confederacy. At first Ross refused, but early Confederate victories in the West made his position difficult, so late in 1861 he signed a treaty of alliance with the Confederacy. In no time at all the Cherokee Nation became a battleground for rampaging Union and Confederate armies. Confederate regiments, authorized by the coun-

cil and headed by Colonel Stand Watie and John Drew fought bravely to defend the nation from invasion, but overwhelming Union forces drove through, captured Tahlequah in the summer of 1862, and thereafter the nation was under Union occupation.

AFTER THE FALL of his national capital, Ross went into exile at Philadelphia, all the while encouraging his people to return to the Union. Most of the full-bloods did so and many joined the Union Army. Colonel Watie, heading the mixed-bloods, became Chief of the Confederate Cherokees, and because of his brilliant military victories over Union forces, notably the Battle of Cabin Creek, 1864, he was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, the only Indian to hold that rank in Union or Confederate armies.

The Union Cherokees were responsible for another first. President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation in late 1862. In February, 1863, they met at Cowskin Prairie in the northern Cherokee Nation and in council adopted resolutions, first, freeing all slaves in the nation, and, second, officially returning the nation to the Union fold. The Cherokee Nation, under Union occupation until the end of the war, became a wasteland because of guerilla warfare and raiding by renegade groups called "free companies." General Watie and his First Cherokee Mounted Rifles fought on under the Confederate flag. He was the last Confederate general to surrender, his capitulation occurring on June 23, 1865.

Things were never the same for the Cherokees after the war. Old differences were slow in healing. Tribesmen, both Union and Confederate, were destitute; their homes, towns, roads, bridges and other improvements had been destroyed, their fields and ranches desolated by four years of wasteful war. Thus weakened by internal division and economic loss, the Cherokees were unable to present a united front to thwart the drastic changes that faced them in the post-Civil War period. This lack of cohesiveness was to plague the nation in the years ahead.

Railroad construction across the nation began in 1870, and while the railroads quickened economic development, they brought the land-hungry homeseeker. After years of "Boomer" promotion, and over the protests of the Cherokees and other Indian tribes, western Indian Territory was opened to settlement in 1889. Oklahoma Territory was organized in 1890 and it grew so rapidly that by 1907 the Twin Territories, Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory, were fused into the State of Oklahoma. The Federal Government had been preparing the Five Civilized Tribes for this union with Oklahoma Territory for several years. In 1898 came the Curtis Act which provided for the gradual dissolution of the Cherokee government, and the Dawes Commission worked at breaking up the Cherokee domain and assigning each Indian on the tribal roll an allotment. With statehood, the once great and powerful Cherokee Nation became a cluster of counties in the new state of Oklahoma, and the Cherokees became citizens of the Sooner State.

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