

Making the Case for The Arkansas Cherokee Heritage Center

In the spring of 1819, the famous naturalist, Thomas Nuttall, traveled up the Arkansas River, and wrote an interesting account of the Western Cherokee as he met them at that time. (This group was also known as “Old Settlers” and “Arkansas Cherokees”. Sequoyah joined them that same year.)

“Both banks of the river...were lined with the houses and farms of the Cherokee, and though their dress was a mixture of indigenous and European taste, yet in their houses, which are decently furnished, and their farms, which were well fenced and stocked with cattle, we perceive a happy approach toward civilization. Their numerous families, also, well fed and clothed, argue a propitious progress in their population. Their superior industry either as hunters or farmers proves the value of property among them, and they are no longer strangers to avarice and the distinctions created by wealth. Some of them are possessed of property to the amount of many thousands of dollars, have houses handsomely and conveniently furnished, and their tables spread with our dainties and luxuries.” *

Looking back almost two hundred years, is it any wonder that many of these Cherokees who had voluntarily moved West years before, would refuse to leave the homes they had worked so hard to establish in Arkansas Territory?

It was a time of great turmoil, when many did not believe promises made by the government, that a move to Indian Territory would forever protect them.

The tragedy is, of course, that they did eventually lose most everything, as they were forced to disavow their Cherokee heritage and live “underground” as part of the encroaching white government and culture.

* Nuttall, Thomas, *Journal of Travels into the Arkansas Territory, etc.*, p.129ff., Philadelphia, 1821, as reported in *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee* by James Mooney, reproduced 1982 by Charles & Randy Elder, Booksellers Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee. This book is a must read for any serious student of Cherokee history, from the time of Spanish exploration, 1540 to 1900, including notes on history, archeology, geography, personal names, botany, medicine, arts, home life, Religion, songs, ceremonies and language of the tribe.

There have been many books written about the terrible hardships of the forced removal of all Cherokees, both East and West, to Indian Territory, the infamous Trail of Tears, the ensuing disputes between Old Settlers and the other Cherokees moved from the East, and government attempts to make all of them fit into a mold. The Dawes Roll is one evidence of that, as well as other policies to enumerate and

decide who is Indian and who is not.

What is missing is a history of those Cherokees who “stayed behind”, who never spoke of their Indian heritage, even to their children, who often presented themselves as Black Dutch or Mexican or Mellungeon to account for a darker skin color. This was a way to survive, to vote or own property or protect your family from blatant discrimination. Still today, older people of color can remember “passing for white” in order to avoid trouble or use a public restroom or find a decent livelihood.

It is the keynote of this article that this “missing history” could well be discovered and documented by the present descendants of the Arkansas Cherokees, working together to establish a Heritage Center . Following is a brief description outlining the benefits of such an organization.

1. **Genealogy**--Although computers and the Internet have been helpful for many people in discovering their ancestral roots, the records of Cherokees who “stayed behind” have never been organized and made into a database that would be available for ordinary people. Such a database could include family records, photographs, census and county records, and cross reference information to trace family oral traditions back to their source. It would be satisfying to find out if “Uncle Henry’s grandpa” really was Cherokee.

Many splinter groups with Cherokee titles in Arkansas now (2.c above) do good things with dances, ceremonies and gatherings, getting people together on a social basis. But too often the emphasis is on “feel good” subjects like ribbon shirts, buckskin dresses, T-shirt sales and Cherokee Princess contests (which, incidentally, historical Cherokees never had “princesses”) An Arkansas Cherokee Heritage Center could offer historically accurate information, with library resources to help with genealogical research. The tribal councils in the olden days thought about how their actions might affect the Seventh Generation. Thinking in those terms, it would be a lot better to leave one’s grandchildren a documented family history, than little trinkets or a T-shirt from a powwow.

2. **Education**--The turmoil of the forced move to Indian Territory in 1838 severely disrupted the traditional educational role that families and clans had always done in Cherokee life. Having to go underground restricted any chances for those “staying behind” to define themselves as a community. Having a Heritage Center can bring that feeling of unity back again.

a. **Heritage Center Displays**--Artifacts, photographs, arts and crafts exhibits could be used to visually educate the circumstances and living conditions faced by the brave families who “stayed behind”.

Tribal Centers have changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Whereas the traditional emphasis was on **how our people lived then**, the educational part comes from emphasizing **what their survival means to us now**.

b. **Outreach Programs to Schools and Other Organizations**--School children in Arkansas and elsewhere may read about the Trail of Tears, but how many know about the hundreds who “stayed behind”, dealt with discrimination at many levels, including the Territorial legislation that declared in 1840 that there were no more Indians in Arkansas, **so that it became unlawful to be recognized as Indian**. Such Outreach programs could be a much-needed lesson in tolerance and understanding differences.

One piece of evidence that shows how much this educational outreach is needed is this: Pick up an Arkansas State map, and you will find little if any references to Native American cultures or historic sites. No references at all concerning the Cherokees who “stayed behind”, even though many of them served with distinction in the Confederate Army.

c. **Tourism Education**--This proposed Arkansas Cherokee Heritage Center could be started in a number of locations along the I-40 corridor between Little Rock and Fort Smith. One attractive location might be near where the Dwight Mission was established in the early 1800’s, near the mouth of the Illinois Creek (Bayou) and the Arkansas River, in what is now Pope County. Nominal admission fees and a gift shop could help sustain the Center.

3. Non-Profit Corporation--As of this date and writing, application has been made to appropriate State and Federal agencies for 501.c(3) status, thus enabling tax-deductible donations and foundation grants. Some wealthy individuals have pledged support and donation of collections.

So, where do we go from here with the alternative idea of establishing an Arkansas Cherokee Heritage Center instead of waiting for “Pie In The Sky” Federal recognition, which may never come?

The first thing to recognize is that thinking people need to face the reality of the situation, which boils down to three fundamental facts:

A. In addition to the three divisions of the LCAM, there are at least a dozen more splinter groups calling themselves Cherokee, all seeking Federal recognition. The BIA has ruled that until the splinter disagreement ends, recognition will not be considered.

B. There are seven (7) hard and fast criteria to be met for any group seeking Federal recognition--mainly, that the group must demonstrate historical ties to Cherokees in the 1800's, and show it has been a distinct and continuous community for over 100 years. There simply is no credible evidence of this for the LCAM, or the other splinter groups.

C. A lot of time, work and money has been spent by these various groups, issuing membership or enrollment cards, supposedly "checking" records and continuing to promise Federal recognition. Likewise, the same unproductive efforts have gone into lawsuits, lasting over five years, with no benefits for any of it. **It surely is time for thinking people to take a hard look at these realities and change direction.**

The second and most important thing is to recognize that the future direction for people with Arkansas Cherokee heritage is to establish a clear, understandable, realistic goal--something that can be achieved by people working together, not depending on the promises of shortsighted leaders.

After a number of people contacted me and offered their support for the idea of an Arkansas Cherokee Heritage Center, I decided to write this letter urging other people to consider it. Please register your opinion on the blog www.lostcherokee.org, and I will try to answer all questions. Also, I will tabulate the responses and post the results every month, so that it is clear whether this is a realistic goal or not.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

**--Bill Roberts
AKA Brad Hawiyehi**