

Historically Speaking:

THE CHEROKEES DURING THE CIVIL WAR

By Lee Uwoyeni Billingsley



The prevalent attitude through the 1800's and enacted into law, was that Indians' insistence on tribal membership and organizing tribal governments prevented their "acculturating" into society as well as becoming U.S. Citizens. Yet even Indians who did manage to become citizens still were not given basic rights such as voting. They could not serve in militias nor carry weapons without a license.

The Five Civilized Tribes; Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole, were described as "Intermediated social links in the chain of civilization."

Indians, especially Delawares, were hired as trackers, guides, and hunters. Many times they were employed by the army in tracking other Indians. This continued in earnest after the Civil War, when many soldiers went west to settle the area and westward expansion cost 75% of the Federal military budget.

1830: INDIAN REMOVAL ACT, resulting in 84,000 Indians being removed west by 1850.

1832: Indian nations were legally labeled as "domestic dependent nations", which meant that Indian nations were sovereign enough to demand loyalty from their members, yet members of an Indian nation could not claim U.S Citizenship by birthright, nor could they apply for citizenship as aliens (as from a foreign independent nation such as Italy).

The Western Cherokee

1854: Kansas-Nebraska Act created the "Kansas and Northeast Territories" out of Indian land, which meant that Indians living there had to move south.

1859: The Keetoowahs were "re-founded" by Christians led by Evan Jones. The group was based on an old Cherokee Medicine Society known as "Anikutani". The group was founded for the purpose of cultivating a national feeling among Full-bloods opposing the innovative tendencies of the mixed blood element. The Keetoowahs supported the North during the war and were known as "Pins" for their habit of wearing crossed pins as a sign of membership.

Forces supporting the Confederacy were established by Stand Watie, who later became a Confederate General; and John Drew, a nephew of John Ross. However, neither John Ross nor his supporters had much use for the Confederacy, supporting the South only temporarily because of the absence of Union forces in the area.

March 1862 Chief John Ross' nephew Drew and his cavalry unit defect to the Union after the battle of Pea Ridge. Other members of the Ross family support the Union during the war.

Summer 1862: John Ross captured by Union forces, taken to Washing D.C. where he is paroled, then spends the rest of the war years there.

Stand Watie becomes Principal Chief of the nation in Ross' absence. He declares that all Cherokee males are conscripted into service for the Confederacy. He attacks Union supporters, mostly Keetoowah "Pins". He destroys Chief Ross' plantation.

1863: The Civil War ravaged the Cherokee nation such that by this time the population decreased from 21,000 to 15,000, and at least 9,000 of these were refugees living in camps near forts Smith and Gibson. By this time too, one third of all married women were widows, one fourth of all children were orphans. Choctaws conscripted by the Confederacy deserted in masse and were captured by the Union army at Vicksburg.

September 1864: Stand Watie wins the Second Battle of Cabin Creek, at which the Union force and supply train was destroyed. Watie's forces spent much of the war disrupting Union supply trains. Ironically, these supplies were meant for Cherokee refugees, both Northern and Southern supporters.

June 23, 1865: Stand Watie surrenders at Doaksville in the Choctaw Nation. He was the last Confederate general to surrender.

September 8, 1865: Fort Smith Conference occurred. It was here that the Cherokee was treated as one people, as though they had all supported the Confederacy. Since they signed an agreement with the Confederacy, the Cherokee forfeited many rights, annuities, land and protection. No Southern state lost land as a result of the fighting for the Confederacy, only the Cherokees. Ross points out that the Cherokees would not have signed a treaty with the Confederacy if the Union had honored its treaty obligation to protect the Nation.

Continued political infighting, starvation, disease, poverty, displacement, being victimized by looting by both Union and Confederate armies; all these had taken their toll on the people such that by September, 1865, the whole nation depended on handouts from the Federal government at Fort Gibson.

To be continued...

Lee Uwoyeni

