

THE SEVEN CEREMONIES

The Cherokee had 7 major ceremonies. Many of these went on for several days and involved fasting, feasting, chants, dances, staying awake all night, immersing in water, purifications rites and divination rituals. These often took place around the time of the New Moons. When the first sliver of crescent light could be seen on the right side of the moon, it was the beginning of a new moon and a ceremony was conducted to cleanse from past impurities and give fortitude for the new moon, of which there were 13 each year.

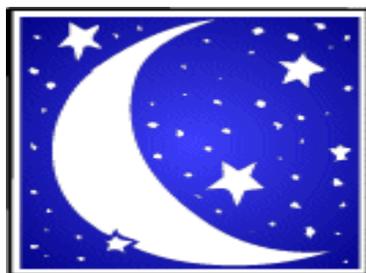
One Cherokee tradition states that the Great Creator made the earth in 7 days and this work was completed on the new moon of Autumn. For this reason we have our Fall ceremony known as "The Great Moon". This is the traditional "New Year" for the Cherokee. However, it is also possible to start counting the major ceremonies on the first new moon of Spring. This would be the new moon nearest to the "Vernal Equinox" (our first day of spring).

So the First New Moon of Spring Ceremony came at the time when the "Cold Moons" were over and the people emerged from their round "Winter Houses" where they had kept a fire burning and were kept warm during the snows and blizzards. It was a happy time to be out in the fresh air more and once again begin their activities of raising gardens, hunting, fishing and interacting with the other nations surrounding them. Like the other ceremonies, it was a time for starting with a clean slate and put behind them all negativity and be spiritually and physically refreshed.

First New Moon Of Spring:

This ceremony was observed around the time the new grass began to grow. This festival was a major one and people came to the capital city from surrounding villages to attend it. 7 hunters went

out to secure venison and other meat for the feast. 7 women and 7 men were commissioned to oversee the festival. In the 7 sided counsel house the fire keeper and his assistant prepared the alter (fire mound or "hearth") for the sacred fire which was present at all the major ceremonies. 7 kinds of sacred wood were used in this fire. The Friendship Dance was done by the women on the first evening of the festival. The next morning the people went to water at the nearby river, immersing themselves 7 times. Divining crystals (probably made of quartz) were consulted by the priests to determine what the future held for the people. A new Sacred Fire was now burning in the center of the council house, attended to constantly by the Fire Keeper and his assistants. The lodges had all their fire mounds cleaned and hot coals from the sacred fire were carried to these lodges. Thus a clean slate was opened before the people for the new ceremonial year.



Green Corn Ceremony

Corn was the "staff of life" for our Cherokee ancestors. They devoted two major yearly ceremonies to honor their cultivation of corn. The Green Corn Ceremony came in early summer when the corn stalks were still green but some young ears of corn began to present themselves. Thus, there was the "promise" of a good harvest of corn and all the other agricultural products that helped them sustain life. During this ceremony the "Uku" Peace Chief placed the tongue of a deer and some corn along with tobacco into the Sacred Fire to symbolize

thanks for good hunting (plenty of meat) and good harvests (plenty of plant food) which would result in good health for the people.



Ripe Corn Ceremony

This ceremony happened in late Summer when the corn had matured and was ready for harvest. Similar to the Green Corn Ceremony, it was to give thanks giving to "The Great One" for a bountiful harvest of corn (which represented all agricultural foods). During this ceremony the "Corn Dance" was done in which the motions of harvesting corn were incorporated into the dance.

Great New Moon Ceremony

The new moon which fell nearest the Autumnal Equinox (first day of Fall) was about the time of this festival. This constituted the "New Year" celebration for our Cherokee ancestors. This would correspond to the ending of our September or the beginning of October. The people went to the river to immerse 7 times prior to the main part of the ceremony. The Diving Crystal was consulted to determine what the new year had in store for the people: peace or war, health or sickness and death. As with other ceremonies, there were times of fast and feasting and staying awake at night, and various dances.



Friends Made Ceremony

This festival also went by the name of "Cementation, Propitiation, or Atahoona." It was based on friendship, love, and making things right. Already at this time of year they were thinking about the cold moons arriving in the near future. Some of the more frail elders might not survive till spring, so if there was any mending of friendships to be done, now was a good time to do it. One part of this ceremony involved the exchanging of garments between two men to symbolize their eternal friendship. Only at this ceremony was the sacred "Yowah" chant sang. 7 selected men "cleansed" the capital council house in a ceremony in which they beat sticks made of Sycamore wood against the rim of the roof.

Bounding Bush Ceremony

This was the last major ceremony before the arrival of the Cold Moons. It prepared the people for the hardships of surviving the Winter. This was a joyful ceremony with feasting and dancing. At one point at the end of the ceremony all people surrounded the fire in the Sacred Square outside the Council House and approached the fire together and threw crushed tobacco leaves into the fire.

The Ookah Dance

This seventh ceremony was conducted only every 7 years. The Great Peace Chief was reinstated with great pageantry and during this festival was carried into the Sacred Square before all the people on a portable platform. New garments were given to the Uku with dancing and great pageantry. This celebration lasted 4 days.

All ceremonies were done with joy and respect to all and had the Sacred Fire in the center.

For further reading: "The Cherokee People" by Thomas E. Mails # # #