

THE PRIMAL FIRE LINGERS

By Janet Campbell and Archie Sam*

The fact is, there are but few individuals amongst them, who have not conformed in some degree to the customs and manners of the whites. But there are communities that cling to their old customs as much as possible, and on many occasions, exhibit the original character of the tribe.¹

These timely words, written by a white resident among the Cherokees in the early nineteenth century, span the ensuing years to portray an accurate description of Cherokee culture today. Assuredly the frontier has changed—once that area east of the Mississippi River, it now approaches outer space.

Reminiscent of the last, great phase of American Indian history in the eastern United States, ceremonies and dances practiced hundreds of years ago survive today in five tribal towns or "Fires" among the Cherokees. One such community is called *Nv-wo-ti*, the Cherokee word for medicine, or "Medicine Spring."²

Sequestered in a serene and wooded area amid rolling hills in the vicinity of Gore, in Muskogee County, the cultural impact of this singular community has been remarkable. Being descendants of a small colony of Natchez-Cherokees who nurtured their sacred fire over the "Trail of Tears" to Indian Territory, the venerable ground played a primary role in the traditional cultural society of the old Cherokee Nation. At one time called Sulphur Springs, it has also been designated as the "Fire" which spawned the significant nativistic movement led by Redbird Smith in resistance to the dissolution of tribal government and impending statehood.³ It continued to promulgate the cultural heritage of the Southeastern Indian as a part of

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¹ I. P. Evans, "Sketches of Cherokee Character, Customs and Manners," John Howard Payne Papers, Ayer Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

² Four other surviving Cherokee ceremonial grounds in Oklahoma are the Chewey Fire near Chewey, the Flint Fire near Stilwell and the Redbird and Stokes fires in the vicinity of Vian.

³ Robert K. Thomas, "The Origin and Development of the Redbird Smith Movement," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 1954, p. 164. Chosen by Pig Smith to instruct his son in the old Cherokee traditions, Creek Sam, of Cherokee and Natchez descent, was a seer considered expert on the tribal lore of the Cherokee, Natchez and Creek, who ultimately became Redbird Smith's teacher and advisor throughout his lifetime.

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Creek Sam, of Cherokee and Natchez descent, was instrumental in the Cherokee cultural renaissance led by Redbird Smith

the state of Oklahoma, and has proved a prodigious repository to a number of eminent scholars who have studied the area.

Considered by authorities to be the preeminent example of a Temple Mound State surviving into modern times, tribal identity of the Natchez people perished after a disastrous war with the French in 1729-1730. However, Natchez blood still flows in the descendants of the small number of survivors who were forced into exile and established towns among the Chickasaws, Creeks and Cherokees. Melding with these peoples for well over a century before removal of the Five Civilized Tribes to Indian Territory, they acquired considerable reputation in the orthodoxy and, because of their strict adherence to ancient traditions, were venerated as "wizards" among the Cherokee people for their observance of "the old ways" amid a society under siege of European culture.⁴

From such a Natchez-Cherokee settlement called *Gu-Lani-Ye*, located near present-day Murphy, North Carolina, came the only sacred fire to be carried among the Cherokee emigrants during the process of removal in 1839. With it came a religion that had sustained them throughout millenniums past, as well as ancient dances, songs and ceremonies that had been passed down through the generations. Today, at *Nv-wo-ti*, the "mother fire" of traditional Cherokee culture in Oklahoma burns as brightly as it did some 136 years ago at *Gu-Lani-Ye*, and offers a titillating glimpse of Mississippian tradition to residents of the Space Age.

Although not easily identified with other prehistoric cultures of the Southeast, archaeological evidence does indicate that the Cherokees were longtime inhabitants of that area. They formed the largest single tribe in the South and one of the largest of all tribes north of Mexico. The fact that basic similarities exist between the Iroquois and Cherokee languages evidence their descent from a common tongue; however, vast dissimilarities lead linguists to believe that the two peoples have been separated for a very long time. The late prehistoric Cherokee culture was essentially Mississippian, and paralleled many of the rituals, ceremonies and religious beliefs of the other southeastern tribes.⁵

The etymology of the word "Cherokee" is enshrouded in mystery. Although names used by white men during the later historic period were frequently given by neighboring tribes to describe particular customs and distinctions of a tribe, the regional characteristics of the country where the tribe lived or to signify simply "people who speak a different language,"

⁴Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., Editor, *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 147, 152.

⁵Thomas M. N. Lewis and Madeline Kneberg, *Tribes That Slumber, Indians of the Tennessee Region* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1966), pp. 155-157.

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most Cherokees refuse to accept these hypotheses and stubbornly insist that the tribal designation of *Tsalagi* is derived from some word in the language. Furthermore, the name does appear in early Spanish, French and English colonial records, albeit in myriad variations in spelling. Some early-day Cherokees called themselves *Ani Kitu hwagi*, or "people of Kituhwa," alluding to their ancient settlement of *Kitu wha*.⁶ They referred to all Indians as *Ani ywui yahi*, or "people real," denoting the principal or original inhabitants of the country. Newcomers were designated by their color—*Ani ywui unega*, or "people white," and *Ani ywui gvhnage*, or "people black."⁷

Typical of the aboriginal lifestyle of other southern Indians, they lived in communities called "towns" along the rivers and creeks of the Southern Appalachian region. In addition to hunting and fishing, their economy was augmented by agriculture, with each matrilineal extended family tilling a small garden in the fertile fields of the alluvial valleys. Each colony or territorial province included a White Town or "Town of Refuge" which held sway over a number of associated villages that surrounded it, and contained a ceremonial center or "townhouse" and a plaza for ritual and festal occasions. The town government consisted of a series of officials headed by the hereditary office of the White chief to conduct civic affairs, direct communal farming and supervise ceremonies. Some of the larger White or "Peace" towns influenced very large areas because of the number of settlements that were attached to them, and were the center of political, social and religious activities. The White chief appointed a militaristic Red chief who was in charge of the secondary Red Town where wars were declared. Imbued with certain requisites of leadership and robust health, the Red chief led another group of officials, similar in structure to the White organization, which functioned only during periods of warfare.⁸

Central to the religious concept of the Mississippian tradition was the perpetual fire which adorned the altar mound in the midst of the ceremonial center. Sacred and undefilable, this symbol of life was tended by priests with much import and consequence. At times addressed as "Ancient and Honorable Red Person" and "Grandfather," tradition decreed fire to be the protector of human life and its smoke was the fire's messenger who bore the

⁶ Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 22.

⁷ Wah-ne-nau-hi (Mrs. Lucy L. Keys), "Historical Sketches of the Cherokees; together with some of Their Customs, Traditions and Superstitions," unpublished manuscript, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1899, p. 10.

⁸ Robert K. Thomas, "The Redbird Smith Movement," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin 180* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 161.

prayers of man heavenward. Only in acts of rededication, within the rites of solemn ceremonial occasions, was the fire extinguished and a new one made. In spite of cultural changes, the spirit of fire remained fundamental to the later traditions of the Indians of the Southeast when the sacred fire no longer burned continuously, but was "made new" during religious ceremonies and dances.

In addition, the number seven cast a mystic shadow upon the lives of the early Cherokees; seven clans cemented the foundation of their later social structure and seven great ceremonies, relevant to subsistence and well-being, formed the cycle of their religious life—six observed annually and one every seven years.

Embellished by myth and ritual, corn or *setu* was revered as the staff of life and was carefully nurtured with great ceremony during its cultivation and harvest. The crescent or new moon phase of *Nudo sunoyi chi*, "the major heavenly body that belongs to the night," established the dates for these grandiose occasions in which only select individuals, disciplined in priestly traditions since childhood, could perform the ancient rites. Under the tutelage of assigned priests, these young men fasted and underwent stringent formal training in seclusion, attended by ceremonial scratching and other ritual, while standing at the brink or in the midst of a flowing stream, facing east. After adequate instruction in the history, rituals, beliefs and medicinal formulas of the tribe, they were ultimately held in the highest esteem by the general populace.⁹

Inauguration of the planting season was the theme of the first great ceremony which honored the "First New Moon of Spring." Held at the capital town, the principal chief met with his advisors during the dark of the moon in early March to plan the celebration and initiate a preliminary regimen that preceded each of the festivals, in which seven messengers were dispatched to announce the date of the observance to fellow tribesmen, seven hunters were sent to acquire meat for the feasts, seven attendants prepared the ceremonial altar and seven others gathered firewood from seven selected species of trees.

On the appointed evening, the assemblage gathered on the plaza at dusk to begin the gala with social dances throughout the night. Dawn introduced the more solemn rites in which a divination of the sacred crystal or stone was made to ascertain the success or failure of the season's crops. The ensuing hours were spent in ceremonial bathing, as individuals faced east and

⁹ Lewis and Kneberg, *Tribes That Slumber. Indians of the Tennessee Region*, p. 160; Jack Frederick Kilpatrick and Anna Gritts Kilpatrick, *The Shadow of Sequoyah, Social Documents of the Cherokees, 1862-1964* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 41.

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dipped seven times into the river. A ritual sacrifice of dried tobacco flowers and a deer's tongue was placed on the sacred fire shortly before sunset, to preface a feast and another all-night dance.

Following seven days of visitation and recreation, the people gathered in the ceremonial center once again to witness the rekindling of the sacred fire. Steeped in the traditions of tribal religion, the fire-keeper extinguished the flames of the perpetual fire in preparation for this august occasion. Then, using dried goldenrod blossoms as tinder and a rod and slab of dry basswood, he ignited the new flame to which he fed branches of blackjack oak, post oak, red oak, sycamore, locust, plum and redbud trees. Having previously extinguished the fires in their dwellings and swept clean the hearths, women were given new embers from the sacred fire with which to rekindle the fires in their homes throughout the nation.¹⁰

Primarily a festival of consecration, the "Green Corn Ceremony," or "roasting ears time," took place in August when the new corn crop had ripened enough to taste. Eating new corn was strictly forbidden until after this important event. Messengers dispatched to announce the observance gathered seven ears of corn, each from the field of a different clan. The chief and his seven counselors fasted for the following six days as the people assembled and, after an all-night vigil, the ceremony began on the seventh day. The sacred fire was extinguished and rekindled as before, and the chief placed the sacrament of deer's tongue and kernels from each of the seven ears of corn on the sacred fire over which he sprinkled tobacco powder to carry the offering heavenward. A great feast followed for all but the chief and his advisors who were not allowed to eat the new corn for an additional seven days.¹¹

The third festival, the "Ripe Corn Ceremony" was held in late September to celebrate the final maturing of the season's crops with more feasting and dancing. Brush arbors were constructed around the plaza in preparation for this event, in which the stellar dance was reserved strictly for male participation. Each man carried an evergreen bough in his right hand as he danced in single file onto the square and encircled seven times a tree positioned in the center of the pavillion. To one side, the chief's assistant or "right hand man" danced independently on a platform held aloft on the shoulders of a group of men. This ritual, performed on each of the four days of the ceremony, required extreme physical exertion. After sunset came the feast, followed by social dances in which women were allowed to participate.

¹⁰ Lewis and Kneberg, *Tribes That Slumber, Indians of the Tennessee Region*, pp. 176-180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180. Robert K. Thomas states that "the last Green Corn dance in the Cherokee Nation was performed by the Creeks under Sleeping Rabbit around the 1870's or 80's."

Some older Cherokees living today can remember a modified version of this ceremony in which they took part during their youth.¹²

Believing that the world was created in the autumn, the Cherokee new year began when the new moon of October appeared at the "Great New Moon Ceremony" or *Nvwtiegova*, meaning "big medicine." Each family that attended the festival brought produce from their own fields to share with tribesmen whose harvest had been insufficient. The observance opened with a religious dance performed by the women, who then joined the spectators in keeping vigil throughout the night. At sunrise, custom dictated that participants dip seven times into the river containing the curative powers of the fallen leaves, followed by a reading of the sacred crystal which foretold the individual's chances for survival during the coming winter months. Those who received a favorable reading withdrew to enjoy the general feast, while the unfortunate ones fasted prior to a second reading scheduled before nightfall and another all-night vigil. This short ceremony lasted only two days and nights.¹³

Then, a ten day interval of elaborate preparations preceded the most profoundly religious of all Cherokee festivals, the *Atahuna*, or "Friends Made Ceremony," which overcame hostilities within the tribe and stressed sentiments of brotherhood and atonement. This occurrence marked the opportunity for citizens to begin life anew. Old clothing and household furnishings were discarded for new and burned in a communal fire on the plaza, old debts were paid, injuries forgiven and enmities reconciled.

White, being symbolic of serenity and joy, dominated all aspects of this important occasion. The walls of the townhouse were whitened with clay and white buckskins were spread over the seats and on the ground of the area reserved for the officials. The masses assembled in the ceremonial center at sunrise to witness the ritual rekindling of the sacred fire on which a priest sprinkled tobacco powder and fanned smoke in the four cardinal directions with the wing of a white heron. Bits of cedar, white pine, hemlock, mistletoe, greenbrier, heart leaf and ginseng enclosed in a small cane basket simmered in a large white vessel filled with water on the sacred fire—the ritual medicine of purification that was used on several occasions during the five days of the festival.

Outside the temple, promenading about the pavillion striking eaves of buildings with rods made from white sycamore, seven men chanted a sacred formula to drive away evil spirits as a priest, costumed in white, ascended the roof of the townhouse to offer a holy incantation. Afterward, seven white gourds were dipped into the medicine which had been brewing on the

¹² Lewis and Kneberg, *Tribes That Slumber, Indians of the Tennessee Region*, pp. 180-181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

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Preparing the ritual medicine of purification used in Cherokee festivals

sacred fire and handed to the headman of each clan, who drank from it and handed it on to his kinsmen. The usual ritual bathing and sacrifice preceded a leisurely feast, after which the women joined in a "Friendship" dance on the square.

This awesome scene was staged on four consecutive days, with minor variations, as all transgressors of the law of clan revenge who had previously fled to safety in "Towns of Refuge" or "White Towns" were free to mingle in peace and friendship among their tribesmen. As the occasion drew to a

close on the fifth day, the medicinal basket was withdrawn from the purification vessel and secretly stored away as the officials and priests imperiously pronounced the ceremony closed and the people dispersed, carrying new embers from the sacred fire.¹⁴

Although too few details have been preserved to understand its true meaning, symbolic sacrifice appears to have been the theme of the "Bounding Bush Ceremony," or "pigeon dance," the last religious celebration of the year held in December. The stellar dance of the festival consisted of men and women alternated in pairs. The two male head dancers, as well as pairs near the center and end of the dancing column, carried hoops having four spokes adorned with white feathers. The remaining dancers carried branches of white pine in their right hands. The dance movement was circular, as one man carrying a small box sang and danced independently within the circle. Ending at midnight, this dance was repeated on three successive nights. Following a feast, the dance was not begun until after midnight on the fourth night with pine needles being placed into the box on this occasion. As dawn approached and the dancing drew to a close, all dancers formed a circle around the altar fire as each one advanced three times toward the fire tossing tobacco and pine needles onto the flames the third time.¹⁵

This brought to a conclusion the ceremonial season of the Cherokee, although local minor observances were performed at each new moon during the year. These six great annual ceremonies reveal the following common religious characteristics: the ceremonial lighting of the sacred fire, ritual sacrifice, purification rites and supplicatory all-night dances. Survival is the tonic cord that resounds through these festivals, pertinent to the ancient and fundamental problems of food and health.

Once every seven years the eucharistic "Uku Dance" replaced the "Great New Moon Ceremony" in October. On this occasion the White chief of the capital town, or "First Beloved Man," was reconsecrated in his office of high priest. Attired in yellow instead of the usual white, the Uku was carried in a procession through the town, preceded by counselors and flanked by a musician and attendant. Majestically placed on a white throne, he kept a silent vigil as the people danced in the ceremonial grounds throughout the night and, at an allotted time, was carried to a circle in the center of the plaza to begin the "Uku Dance." Moving with measured dignity, he rhythmically nodded toward the spectators, who bowed to him in return. Simultaneously, lesser officials imitated his steps outside the circle in single file. Following a feast, he retired to his quarters to await the next perform-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184; Woodward, *The Cherokees*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Lewis and Knoberg, *Tribes That Slumber, Indians of the Tennessee Region*, pp. 184-185.

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ance. He was reinvested with his civil powers on the fourth day, and the ceremony ended.¹⁶

Thus, this segment of the religious organization of the Cherokees typifies the Southeastern Indian customs and traditions that collided with the advancement of white civilization along the Appalachian frontier in a period approaching the American Revolution, resulting in rampant social disorganization and drastic cultural change. Today, only suggestions of the ancient "Ripe Corn Ceremony" survive. Lacking many of the religious connotations of the other festivals, resulting in fewer conflicts with the doctrines of the Christian religion, it has endured into the twentieth century and remains a part of the contemporary culture of the Cherokees in tribal towns like *Nowotli*. During the summer months, the *gatiyoi* or central meeting place, commonly called a stomp ground, echoes this great social event.

In addition to the intrinsic role played in Cherokee religious ceremonies, dances also permeated the pageant of war. The "Warrior Dance" was performed before a war party set out for battle. In this dance, braves affected blows to the enemy with ceremonial war clubs painted red and black, symbolic of blood and fearlessness. Begun slowly, the tempo of the dance steadily increased until it was abruptly ended with four loud war whoops.¹⁷

The momentous "Eagle Dance" was reserved for victory celebrations and peace negotiations, during which the most athletic of the young dancers decorated their heads with feathers and carried fans made from the highly valued tail feathers of the golden eagle. Moving in columns of from four to six deep, these young men exhibited their prowess with a series of short fast dances and shrill war whoops, after which sagacious elders related the exploits and adventures of their youth. To stumble during this dance or allow the fan to touch the ground was considered an unlucky omen.¹⁸

And finally, dances provided a primary source of recreation in the society of the Southern Indians. Social dancing usually followed the formal religious activities of the day during these festivals, and were held on the same grounds after the daytime ceremonies were over. Directed by the town's White officials acting as ceremonial priests, these all-night dance sessions were community affairs and served to promote and cement social bonds; however, they carried a religious connotation in that it was imperative that they continue throughout the night as an act of worship. If a situation

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I. P. Evans, "Sketches of Cherokee Character, Customs and Manners," John Howard Payne Papers, pp. 22-23.

occurred that prevented the all-night dance, custom dictated an all-night vigil must follow.

At one time many of the "Social Dances" were named after animals, birds, fish and insects common to the southern forests, during which dancers pantomimed the act of hunting or portrayed some behavioral trait of the central character of the dance. Encircling the fire, usually moving in single or "Indian" file in a counterclockwise direction, these dances were accompanied by wet or "medicine" drums, rattles and singing. Men carried gourd rattles, while terrapin shell rattles filled with small pebbles were fastened to the ankles of the dancing women. Most of these dances were humorous and entertaining. If a dance honored the totem animal of a Cherokee clan, clan members were quick to feign offense at improvisations of the head singer and break rank, scattering the dancers and ending the dance with laughter.

Changing customs and beliefs have diminished the importance of the former great social dances and the simpler "Common or Stomp" dances have grown in popularity. Stomp dances are lead by a head dancer, followed by a single file of participants. Male dancers enter the square and walk around the fire several times; sometimes a hollow drum in which the medicine used in religious rituals is poured, or "medicine" drum accompaniment, is used to signal the start of the dance. Women wearing rattles take their places between the men as the leader begins the dance, singing short stanzas which are repeated in unison by the male dancers—described by one nineteenth century observer as resembling a boat song. The tempo of the dance is again set by the head dancer and women wearing leg rattles. In closing, dancers sometimes interlock hands and follow the lead dancer in turning and winding around the square, producing confusion and ending the performance with laughter. This "Wind Up Dance" may be repeated at any time during the night as a diversion, or when the leader senses a lag in the enthusiasm of the dancers.

As dawn approaches, a series of three dances conclude the night's festivities. In the first, or "Morning Dance," women remove their rattles for the night, and whoop and sing along with the men. With staggering motions, the "Drunk Dance" expresses the heady exhilaration of the dancers who, in spite of general fatigue, accomplished their goal of dancing the night through. Finally, the more religious "Olden or Grandpa Dance," solemnly repeated four times, formally ends the session at daybreak.

Once performed by women only in several of the ancient religious daytime ceremonies, the "Friendship Dance" remains in the repertoire of contemporary Cherokee culture. Following a supplicatory "Long Dance," indicative of the desire to continue dancing throughout the night, and four



Nancy Raven, who in 1931 was one of the last two Natchez speakers in Oklahoma

common dances, so named because they were common to all the Southeastern tribes, the "Friendship Dance" signifies a warm welcome to visitors and an invitation to join in the festivities. While continually shaking his rattle, the leader announces the dance as participants form a single file facing east. When the dance begins, the performers join hands and move in a counterclockwise direction around the fire. The male leader, carrying a rattle, and women wearing leg rattles set the cadence of the dance; women

owning the traditional turtle shell rattles preceding the dancers wearing the more recent milk can shakers. In fluctuating and descending melodic patterns common throughout southeastern Indian songs, short stanzas sung by the leader and recited by the rest of the male dancers in line are repeated as often as the leader wishes, depending upon the response of the dancers. Although the text of various phrases resembles the Cherokee word for friendship, *oil i*, the collection of short songs is so old that a translation cannot be elicited; however, the dance is believed to be a conglomerate of Cherokee, Natchez and Creek songs indigenous to the *Nvuwoti* community.

The piquant "Mosquito Dance," thought to be a vestige of Natchez culture, is also performed by members of Medicine Spring to "liven things up" during the early morning hours. Simulating the mosquito in flight, women softly hum in unison with the singer-leader as they dance a running step counterclockwise around the fire. At intervals, designated by an accent in the beat of the drum, the mosquito "bites" as dancers prick sleepy tribesmen with long pins. Repeated four times, the women move counterclockwise around the ceremonial ground waking men in each of the "beds" or clan houses, who after being revived rejoin the dancing which continues until the break of day.¹⁹

Rooted in the Mound Builder cultures of the distant past, these ancient songs and dances remain interwoven in the cultural fiber of tribal towns like *Nvuwoti*, not solely to arouse sleepy dancers, but to reawaken the interest of Indian youth to the heritage uniquely theirs. Descendants of the Old Southeast stand resplendent in the traditions, values and lifestyles which have evolved in the course of centuries of New World adaptation, resulting in people of infinite differences yet remarkable sameness. The once "Vanishing American" prevails and the primal fire lingers—symbolic still of what they were, what they are, and the unending cycle of their timeless ancestry.

¹⁹ Charlotte Heth, "The Mosquito Dance," unpublished manuscript, University of California, Los Angeles, California, 1973, p. 4.