

By Bill
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Cherokee Women

Life for Cherokee women has changed dramatically in the last 100 years—for the worse. Today, in 1848, you live in the land called Oklahoma, where the United States army moved you by force. But there was a time when you had more power, respect, and happiness.

In Cherokee culture, women historically had great influence. It was the man who went to live in the house of the woman's family. Marriage gave him no right to control her or her property. As John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee, explained to a white U.S. general: "By the laws of the Cherokee Nation, the property of husband and wife remain separate and apart and neither of these can sell or dispose of the property of the other." If they "divorced," the women kept the children and her property. The men were the main hunters, but women were the main farmers, and the women's families controlled the fields. However, the Cherokee did not believe in private property, like in the white society. Anyone could use unoccupied territories, but cultivated fields were controlled by large families. No individual or family could *own* land. Women signed the early land agreements between Cherokees and whites.

The more contact between the white Europeans and the Cherokees, the more power the women lost. The Europeans wanted to deal only with men, because men were the hunters and the warriors. And the Europeans wanted to make military alliances with the Cherokees, and to trade for deer skins. For these needs they had no use for the women. Meanwhile the white Protestant missionaries who came into your territory wanted Cherokee women to act like

white women. They wanted them to convert to Christianity, wear dresses, and allow the men to head the households.

Whites also pushed for Cherokees to give up the traditional method of land ownership. But in white society, the husband legally owned a married woman's property, even property she held before marriage—this is still true in 1848. However, you worried less about your own personal land than the land of your people. Thirty years ago, in 1818, a group of Cherokee women urged the Cherokee men not to give up any lands to the white landowners and the U. S. government. As they said, "The land was given to us by the Great Spirit above as our common right, to raise our children upon, and to make support for our rising generations. We, therefore, humbly petition our beloved children, the head men of warriors, to hold out to the last in support of our common rights, as the Cherokee nations have been the first settlers of this land; we, therefore claim the right of the soil."

However, slowly, whites in nearby Georgia claimed the land should belong to them and began to come onto Cherokee land and attacked your people. Georgia law prohibited Cherokees from testifying in court. Many Cherokees tried to appeal to the whites by adopting their ways. In fact, in 1826 the Cherokee government adopted a law that no woman could vote or hold office.

Finally, the United States government took all the Cherokees' land from them and forcibly moved them to Oklahoma. About 15,000 people were marched west; 4,000 died on the trip that was later named the Trail of Tears. An

eyewitness reported that "even aged females, apparently nearly ready to drop in the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens attached to the back." At least 69 Cherokee women gave birth along the Trail of Tears. One observer said that troops forced women in labor to continue marching until they collapsed and gave birth "in the midst of the company of soldiers." One soldier even stabbed a pregnant Cherokee woman with a bayonet.

After removal to Oklahoma your people had to totally rebuild. Now, in 1848, the divisions

among the Cherokee have been healed and new schools are under construction, including a college for Cherokee young women. Your major worry is that white settlers and the United States government will once again steal your land and kill your people. In places like Kansas Territory, just north of Oklahoma, white settlers are beginning to move in and take Indian land. You don't want another Trail of Tears. You don't want your children and families attacked once again.