

Native American Traditions in Appalachia

BARBARA R. DUNCAN

CHEROKEE CULTURE

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Powwow dancing, frybread, beadwork—these Native American traditions have been visible at the Folklife Festival for years. Tribes from all over the United States have come to the Mall to share their music, stories, beliefs, crafts, and foodways. Beyond these brief public glimpses and behind a thick layer of stereotypes, Native Americans continue to keep alive a rich variety of traditions that sustain them spiritually and define their distinct cultures.

In the eastern United States, the Cherokees dominated all of the southern Appalachian region (140,000 square miles) for more than a thousand years. They identify the place where the first Cherokee man and woman lived—Shining Rock. They recently purchased the legendary, sacred place where the first Cherokee village stood—the mother town, Kituhwa. And they still live in this area of the mountains of western North Carolina, on land that they own, held in trust by the federal government.

Although most of the Cherokee nation was removed to Indian Territory on the Trail of Tears in 1838, about a thousand people managed to stay in the east—through legal means, by hiding in the rugged mountains, and by returning from the west. Today the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians numbers about 12,500 people, while the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma tops 200,000. With the United Katoowah Band of about 15,000, the Cherokees form the second largest tribe in the United States.

Today, the Eastern Cherokee maintain traditions of music, storytelling, dance, foodways, carving, basket-making, beadwork, pottery, blowgun-making, flint-knapping, and more. Their language, which was forbidden by the federal schools for more than half a century, is being revived in classrooms and the community. Cherokee culture is based on seeking balance in the world and embracing harmony. Being in balance means being responsible for one's actions and remembering the good of the whole—the family, the tribe, and the earth.

Cherokee music originally was used for dancing, welcoming visitors, courting, and ceremonies. Instruments included water drums, gourd rattles, turtleshell rattles, and rivercane flutes. Singing was in unison, or with call-and-response for dancing. In the dance traditions, songs were sung by a male leader, who also drummed or shook a rattle. Women provided essential rhythms by wearing turtleshell rattles fastened to the knee while they danced. The introduction of the fiddle in the 18th century led to a strong instrumental music tradition among the Cherokees by 1800. At this time, Christian hymns entered Cherokee musical tradition as well. Today, Cherokee people continue the old, sacred dance traditions unique to their tribe. They also sing gospel music and hymns in English and Cherokee, usually with three-part harmony and accompanied by a guitar, much in the style of the Carter Family, often using shape-note melodies and 19th-century camp meeting hymns. Cherokee people today also do powwow singing and drumming,

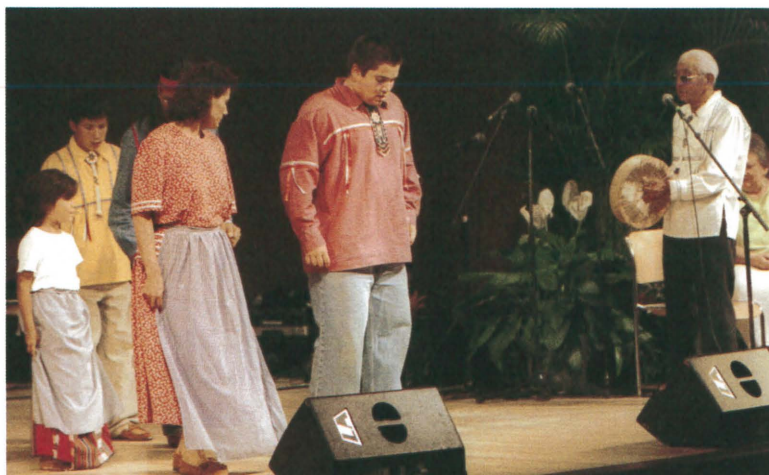
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and play bluegrass, blues, and rock 'n' roll.

Cherokee storytelling traditions retain the rhythms and aesthetic of the ancient folktales, although stories are told mostly in English now. Grandmothers and grandfathers tell stories to youngsters at home and in the community, and some storytellers take their art to audiences around the country. Cherokee stories teach children and remind adults what it means to be Cherokee through the adventures of possum, turtle, deer, and others. The values conveyed provide lessons for being in balance: don't brag; don't be quick to anger; think of others; respect the elders, the earth, and yourself. Stories also paint a mythical landscape of little people, monsters, and culture-shaping events that occurred on the real landscape of western North Carolina.

Cherokee foodways also connect people to the land. Cherokee women developed their own genetically unique corn (*selu-ya*) over centuries of cultivation, and still use it today. They grow the plants they have cultivated for more than a thousand years: corn, several varieties of beans, squash, pumpkins, sunflowers, and gourds. They still gather wild greens: ramps, sochan, creasies, sweet cane, poke, and others. Today, a Cherokee "Indian dinner" includes chicken or wild game, bean bread, greens, hominy, herb tea, and fruit cobbler. Cherokee women invented hominy. They begin by making lye, by running water through hardwood leaves; the corn is then soaked in it until it softens. A special basket is used to rinse the corn, which, after cooking, becomes hominy.

The Eastern Cherokee have relied on tourism for economic development for most of the 20th century. Located at the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as the Blue Ridge Parkway, the town of Cherokee, North Carolina, welcomes more than ten million visitors annually. A new cultural tourism project, the Cherokee Heritage Trails, takes visitors to Cherokee sites throughout the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. ■



The Walker Calhoun family from Cherokee, North Carolina, performs traditional animal dances at the 2001 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Photos by Jeff Tinsley
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