Cherokee Culture

A Proud Heritage

Since the earliest contact with European explorers in the 16th century, Cherokees have been identified as one of the most socially and culturally advanced American Indian tribes. Cherokee culture thrived hundreds of years before European contact in the southeastern area of what is now the United States. After the Europeans arrived, Cherokee society and lifestyle continued to develop, embracing cultural elements from the settlers.

Gold was discovered in Georgia in the 1830s. Outsiders coveted Cherokee homelands, and a period of “Indian removals” made way for encroachment by settlers, prospectors and others. Ultimately, thousands of Cherokee people were forced to relocate to “Indian Territory,” which is today part of Oklahoma.

Rebuilding

Cherokees re-established themselves in Indian Territory. The new Cherokee capital of Tahlequah, and nearby Park Hill, became the hub of business and cultural activity. Cherokees adopted a new constitution in 1839, and in 1844, the Cherokee Advocate, printed in both Cherokee and English, became the first newspaper in Indian Territory and the first-ever published in an American Indian language. The years between removal and the 1860s were prosperous, ending in tribal division over loyalties in the Civil War. More Cherokee lands and rights were taken by the federal government after the war in reprimand for Cherokees who sided with the Confederacy. The remaining tribal land was divided into individual allotments and doled out to Cherokee people listed in the Dawes Commission census in the late 1890s. The descendants of those original enrollees make up today’s Cherokee Nation tribal citizenship.

Traditional Belief System

Ancient Cherokee people devised a belief system to create and maintain order. Although some elements have been modified, this belief system is an integral part of day-to-day life for many Cherokees. Circle - The stomp dance and other ceremonies involve movements in a circular pattern. In ancient times, the fire in the council house was built by arranging the wood in a continuous “X” so the fire would burn in a circular path.
Numbers – The numbers four and seven repeatedly occur in myths, stories and ceremonies. Four represents the four cardinal directions: east, west, north and south. Seven represents the seven Cherokee clans (Bird, Deer, Wolf, Paint, Blue, Long Hair and Wild Potato) and the seven directions (cardinal directions, plus the upper world, lower world and world where people live). The number seven also represents the height of purity and sacredness, a difficult level to attain.

Pine, Cedar, Spruce, Holly and Laurel – These plants carry leaves all year long and play an important role in Cherokee ceremonies. Cedar is the most sacred of all, and the distinguishing colors of red and white set it off from all others.

Water – The river, or “long man,” is believed to be sacred. Going to water for purification and other ceremonies was at one time a common practice. Today, the river and other bodies of moving water, such as creeks, are considered sacred sites, and going to water is still a respected tradition.

Today’s Cherokee Nation

Cherokee Nation is an active leader in education, housing, vocational training, business and economic development. It is the largest Indian tribe in the United States with more than 385,000 tribal citizens. Forty percent reside within a 7,000 square mile geographical area, which is not a reservation but a federally-recognized, sovereign nation covering most of northeast Oklahoma.