

Indians in Arkansas: The Cherokee

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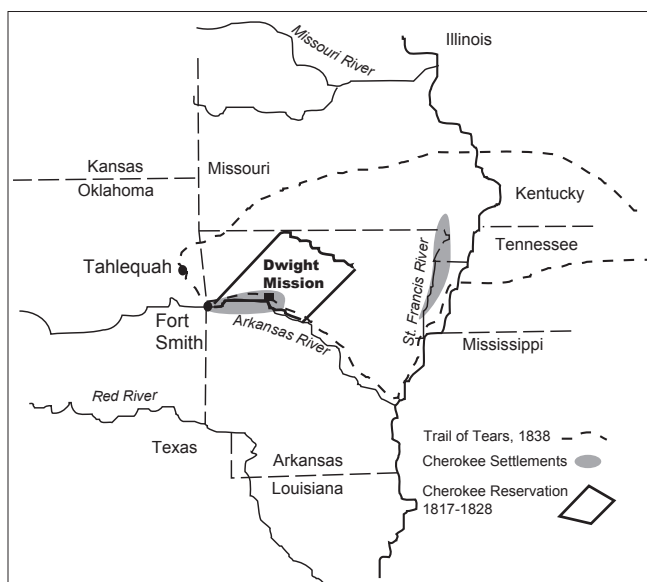


The original homeland of the Cherokee Indians was western North and South Carolina, northern Georgia, and northeastern Tennessee. By the late 1700s, so many Europeans were living in those areas that some Indians began moving west. By 1800 there may have been as many as 1000 Cherokees living along the St. Francis River in southeast Missouri and northeast Arkansas, and only a few years later there were more than 1000 living along the Illinois Bayou and the Arkansas River near what are now Russellville and Dardanelle.

Although they did not like contact with Europeans, they had accepted many European goods, like iron kettles for cooking and guns. They built log cabins much like their white neighbors. They farmed and hunted, and traded with other Indians in the area. In 1805, a government trading post was established at Spadra to provide goods to the Cherokees, and in return the Cherokees sold skins and bear oil (used for food and lamps) to the trader.

The Osage Indians, who lived in southwest Missouri, used most of northern Arkansas for a hunt-

ing ground. Osage hunters were constantly attacking Cherokee farmsteads. The Cherokees would fight back and complained to the government that they were not protected. In 1817 the government established an official reservation for the Cherokee in Arkansas, where they were supposed to be able to live without threat

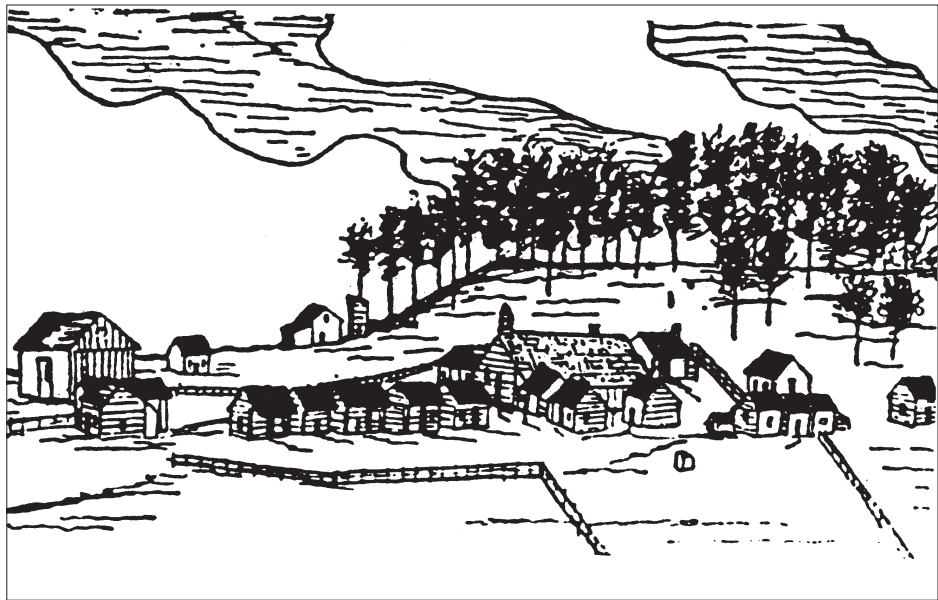


from the Osage. Fort Smith was also established as a military post so that soldiers could stop the Cherokee and Osage from attacking each other. By this time there may have been as many as 3000 Cherokees in Arkansas, a few of whom lived along the Buffalo River and its tributaries, while most lived along the Arkansas River.

In 1820 a minister arrived and established Dwight Mission about five miles north of the Arkansas River on Illinois Bayou. This mission was to provide religious services for the Indians, and a school for Cherokee children. By 1824 the mission had a large dormitory building where upwards of 70 to 80 children lived during the week, a dining hall, several log cabins used as houses by the teachers and missionaries, a mill for grinding flour, a saw mill, a smokehouse for preserving meat, and a carpentry shop. In all, there may have been as many as 30 buildings. A cemetery for this community was established on a hill nearby. The land where all the Dwight Mission buildings were is now under the waters of Lake Dardanelle, but the cemetery is still on the hill nearby.

The Cherokee in Arkansas had several prominent Chiefs over the years. One was called "The Bowl." He and several families settled south of Dardanelle on Dutch Creek, but they did not stay there long. By 1819 they had moved south to a prairie near the Red River in present-day Miller County, and after a year there, they moved on to Texas.

Chief Toluntuskee was the first Chief and it was he who invited the missionaries to come to the area. When he died, his brother John Jolly became Chief. Although the "community" of Cherokee farmsteads was spread over many miles along the River and up Piney Creek and Illinois Bayou, people would come together for various festivals, particularly one in the summer called the Green Corn Ceremony. There



A sketch of Dwight Mission made in 1824.

would be ceremonies and dances, and stickball games played by the men and boys. Stickball is a game played by two teams. Each person holds a stick with a little net at the end, and there is a small ball that each team must get to the opposite end of the field without touching the ball with their hands. It can be a very rough game! It originated among Indian tribes in the southeastern United States and is still played today by the Cherokee.

By 1828 the white settlers were again pressuring the Indians to move farther west. The Territory of Arkansas had been established, and more people wanted the land where the Cherokees were living. All the people at Dwight Mission moved 150 miles west into Indian Territory (Oklahoma) in 1829, and most of the Cherokees followed. The reservation was dissolved and the area of the Ozarks was open for white settlement.

Ten years later, in 1838, thousands of Cherokees from the East were moved to Indian Territory by the U.S. Army. This removal is known as "The Trail of Tears" because so many Indians lost their lives on that long walk in the winter of 1838–39. Some of



these groups came up the Arkansas River, or overland through southern Missouri and northwest Arkansas, before ending up near Tahlequah, where the headquarters of the Cherokee Tribe is today.

Although most Cherokees moved west with their friends and relatives by 1840, there are still many peo-

ple in Arkansas today of Cherokee descent. There are now about 150,000 Cherokees living in Oklahoma. There are also over 3000 Cherokees still living in western North Carolina, descendants of those who hid in the mountains when the soldiers came to lead them to Indian Territory.

For Further Reading

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