

## **Echoes From the Past**

### **STAND WATIE, CHEROKEE STATESMAN**

**Cherokee Indian Stand Watie is well known in Oklahoma as the Indian Confederate General who harassed Federal troops in many skirmishes during the Civil War and led the successful assault and capture of a million dollar wagon train at the second battle of Cabin Creek. Fifty eight years old at that time and 59 when he became the last southern general to surrender, it would appear that Stand Watie had made his mark on history. In fact, long before his “second life” in Indian Territory, Watie had already made his mark on United States and Cherokee history.**

**From the time of arrival of the Europeans, many liberal Cherokees had assimilated the life styles of the white man although there was still a significant faction of traditionalists who maintained the old ways. This transformation of the liberals had found favor with British authorities and, in turn the tribe had sided with England during the Revolutionary War in hopes they would win and thereby control the intrusion of white settlers on Cherokee lands. Unfortunately for both, the other side won and both Washington and Jefferson as presidents pressed Congress for legislation to move Indian tribes further westward. In addition to reducing the threat of violence between whites and Indians there was a political motivation. Indian land purchased at an average of 25 cents an acre could be sold to settlers at \$1.25, thus enabling the government to obtain cash to pay off war debts.**

**This was the political climate when Stand Watie also known as Degataga “he stands” was born December 12, 1806 at Olthcaloga in the Cherokee Nation. Watie received his education at Moravian Mission School and as he grew to manhood he served as a clerk on the Cherokee Supreme Court and, eventually as Speaker of the National Council. So this was an educated and experienced 29 year old who participated in negotiations with the government in 1835.**

**As early as 1802 a movement had been underway to remove the Cherokees and other tribes through a treaty agreement and the pressure to enforce it had ebbed and flowed over the years. More recently the Georgia legislature had passed a number of acts inhibiting the Cherokees from controlling their land, even to the extent of surveying and distributing the lands by lottery to whites. Fortunately, in 1832 the United States Supreme Court ruled against the Georgia legislation and it appeared that Cherokee lands would be safe. Unfortunately Andrew Jackson, now president, favored removal and defied the courts. Jackson allegedly stated that “the court has made this ruling now let them enforce it.” These arguments within the government slowed the impetus toward removal but the balance was tipped when gold was discovered in northern Georgia.**

**Earlier allegiance to England, a removal treaty, land that potentially provided income to the government, a president in favor of removal and the discovery of gold in the region, compounded the issue. Also, dividing the nation was the nearly fanatical attitude of traditionalists led by Chief John Ross who believed the Cherokees had been pushed beyond reason. These were the circumstances in 1835 that faced young Stand Watie and his mixed breed associates Elias Boudinet and Major Ridge, so-called Treaty Party advocates, as they**

attempted to negotiate an agreement. Ultimately, faced with these overwhelming odds, the debate boiled down to remove or be removed. Consequently on December 29, 1835 Treaty Party advocates sold the Cherokee lands for \$5,700,000 pledging to remove to Indian Territory in three years. Many chose to move, others remained only to be harassed by local government officials and gangs. Sadly, three years later those who had remained behind were forcibly removed by federal troops. Nearly 25% died during the journey creating even a greater rift between the two Indian factions.

Retribution was slow in coming, but come it did. On June 22, 1839 John Ridge, Elias Boudinet and Major Ridge were all assassinated in an orchestrated attack by the Ross party faction. Only Stand Watie escaped to avenge their deaths and through the years more fatalities were recorded on both sides. The factionalism rose again when, during the Civil war, Cherokee fought Cherokee for the north and the south, in part over the removal issue.

The circumstances of removal were not limited just to the Cherokees it was repeated among tribes over and over under the mantra “Manifest Destiny,” while terms of treaties “as long as grass grows and the rivers flow” were repeatedly violated. However, the ghosts of treaty signers including Stand Watie may be smiling today as contemporary tribes exert their sovereign status as nations and extract gold from the white gamblers in casinos everywhere.



