

# Theories and Legends

Contemporary Cherokees are the descendants of a large and powerful American Indian tribe that has existed since prehistory, further back than anyone can really say. No one knows for sure from whence the Cherokees originated. Many scholars still insist that all peoples native to the Americas came into America from Asia by way of the Bering Strait land bridge. They say that twelve thousand years ago, during the last ice age, there were no human beings in the Americas. Therefore, they say, there are no true natives of this land, only the earliest immigrants.

These earliest immigrants, they say, came down into North America from Asia across a land bridge that had formed during the ice age, linking the two continents. These people, they say, were simply wandering, i.e. nomadic, big-game hunters, and they were following the game. They apparently continued to follow it until they had spread out and covered two continents, North and South America, and as their population grew and they separated into different groups and eventually settled in different areas, slowly different languages and different cultures developed. That's the theory that is still widely accepted, and at least one Cherokee migration legend might be seen to support this theory. Told originally by a Cherokee to an Englishman named Alexander Long in 1717 in Carolina, the tale was published in "A Cherokee Migration Fragment" by Corkran (and quoted in Thornton's population history), and it runs partly as follows. (The spelling has been modernized here and some few words provided in brackets to clarify the sense.)

For our coming here, we know nothing but what was had from our ancestors and has brought it down from generation to generation. The way is thus. [We] belonged to another land far distant from here, and the people increased and multiplied so fast that the land could not hold them, so that they were forced to separate and travel to look out for another country. They traveled so far that they came to another country that was so cold. . . . Yet going still on, they came to mountains of snow and ice. The priests held a council to pass these mountains, and that they believed there was warmer weather on the other side of those mountains because it lay near the sun setting. [It] was believed by the whole assembly we were the first to make [snowshoes] to put on our old and young. [We] passed on our journey and at last found [ourselves] so far gone over these mountains till we lost sight of the same and went through darkness for a good space, and then [saw] the sun again, and going on we came to a country that could be inhabited. (Thornton, p. 6)

At least one scholar, Dr. Jeffrey Goodman, in his book *American Genesis*, takes exception to that theory. As far as the Bering Strait migration theory is concerned, Goodman maintains that just the opposite from the standard belief probably occurred. He says that Modern Man existed in North America, specifically in what is now Southern California, at least fifty thousand years ago, at a time when Europe and Asia were still populated by Neanderthal Man.

He further speculates that there is no "missing link" between Neanderthal Man and Modern Man, because the two were never linked in the first place. The Bering Strait migration did take place, Goodman says, but it involved the migration of Modern Man from America as he moved north into Asia and then into Europe to displace the Neanderthals. That too is a theory, and like the other, it is based on a certain amount of evidence followed by speculation. One theory is perhaps as good as the other. And more recently, some scholars have begun to argue that there could have been several, if not many migrations into the Americas, from Asia and from islands in the Pacific Ocean.

And Vine Deloria, Jr., in his *Red Earth, White Lies* (Scribner, 1995), says that some of his "history colleagues were beginning their courses on American history with a mindless recitation of the Bering Strait theory. . . . Basically they were simply repeating scholarly folklore, since there is, to my knowledge, no good source which articulates the theory in any reasonable format. Indeed, this 'theory' has been around so long that people no longer feel they have to explain or defend it-they can merely refer to it." Later he says "The Bering Strait exists and existed only in the minds of scientists."

But if we choose to belabor the issue of the Bering Strait, there is yet a third possibility, one not often considered. If the land bridge was, as they say, a vast plain, is it not reasonable to assume that people lived on

the plain, and that when the water level rose, the people were separated, some going north into Asia, some south into North America? Probably the argument over the land bridge will never be resolved, but from a Native American perspective, it is really not all that important anyway. It certainly never entered into any of the origin tales of the Cherokees. Here is the best known, collected by James Mooney in North Carolina between 1887 and 1890 and published by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1900.

### **How the World Was Made**

The earth is a great island floating in a sea Of water, and suspended at each of the four cardinal points by a cord hanging down from the sky vault, which is of solid rock. When the world grows old and worn out, the people will die and the cords will break and let the earth sink down into the ocean, and all will be water again. The Indians are afraid of this.

When all was water the animals were above in Galun lati, beyond the arch; but it was very much crowded, and they were wanting more room. They wondered what was below the water, and at last Dayuni si, "Beaver's Grandchild," the little Water-beetle, offered to go and see if it could learn. It darted in every direction over the surface of the water, but could find no firm place to rest. Then it dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which began to grow and spread on every side until it became the island which we call the earth. It was afterward fastened to the sky with four cords, but no one remembers who did this.

At first the earth was flat and very soft and wet. The animals were anxious to get down, and sent out different birds to see if it was yet dry, but they found no place to alight and came back again to Galun lati. At last it seemed to be time, and they sent out the Buzzard and told him to go and make ready for them. This was the Great Buzzard, the father of all the buzzards we see now.

He flew allover the earth, low down near the ground, and it was still soft. When he reached the Cherokee country, he was very tired, and his wings began to flap and strike the ground, and wherever they struck the earth there was a valley, and where they turned up again there was a mountain. When the animals above saw this, they were afraid that the whole world would be mountains, so they called him back, but the Cherokee country remains full of mountains to this day.

When the earth was dry and the animals came down, it was still dark, so they got the sun and set it in a track to go every day across the island from east to west, just overhead. It was too hot this way, and Tsiska gili, the Red Crawfish, had his shell scorched a bright red, so that his meat was spoiled; and the Cherokees do not eat it. The conjurers put the sun another hand-breadth higher in the air, but it was still too hot. They raised it another time, and another, until it was seven handbreadths high and just under the sky arch. Then it was right, and they left it so. This is why the conjurers call the highest place Gulkwa gine Di galun latiyun, "the seventh height," because it is seven hand-breadths above the earth. Every day the sun goes along under this arch, and returns at night on the upper side to the starting place.

There is another world under this, and it is like ours in everything-animals, plants, and people-save that the seasons are different. The streams that come down from the mountains are the trails by which we reach this underworld, and the springs at their heads are the doorways by which we enter it, but to do this one must fast and go to water and have one of the underground people for a guide. We know that the seasons in the underworld are different from ours, because the water in the springs is always warmer in winter and cooler in summer than the outer air.

When the animals and plants were first made-we do not know by whom-they were told to watch and keep awake for seven nights, just as young men now fast and keep awake when they pray to their medicine. They tried to do this, and nearly all were awake through the first night, but the next night several dropped off to sleep, and the third night others were asleep, and then others, until, on the seventh night, of all the animals only the owl, the panther, and one or two more were still awake. To these were given the power to see and to go about in the dark, and to make prey of the birds and animals which must sleep at night. Of the trees only the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the holly, and the laurel were awake to the end, and to them it was given to be always green and to be greatest for medicine, but to the others it was said: "Because you have not endured to the end you shall lose your hair every winter."

Men came after the animals and plants. At first there were only a brother and sister until he struck her with a fish and told her to multiply, and so it was. In seven days a child was born to her, and thereafter every seven days another, and they increased very fast until there was danger that the world could not keep them. Then it was made that a woman should have only one child in a year, and it has been so ever since. (pp. 239 ff.)

This tale would seem to constitute a claim that the Cherokees have always been in the old Cherokee country in what is now the southeastern part of the United States.

Cherokees speak an Iroquoian language, their nearest linguistic relatives being the Iroquoian people from

around the Great Lakes: Mohawks, Oneidas, Senecas, Onondagas, and Cayugas. The Cherokees' neighbors in the old southeast were mostly Muskogean speakers, though there were also some Siouan, some Tunican, some Algonquian, and others.

For that reason, and because the Lenni Lenape, also known as the Delaware, may have an ancient tale called "The Walam Olum" in which they describe a war between themselves and the Cherokees, whom they called "Talligewi," scholars maintain that the Cherokees lived in the northeast and migrated south. (It should be mentioned here that some scholars believe "The Walam Olum" to be a hoax.)

However another tale from the oral tradition comes from the Nighthawk Keetoowah Cherokees of Oklahoma. As told by Levi Gritts, it was published in *The Cherokee Nation News* in 1973, and it goes something like this.

A long time ago the Cherokees lived on an island off the coast of South America. Then a time came when they were attacked by seventy different tribes, and they fled the island, moving to the mainland. From there they went farther inland and then turned north. They wandered for a long time until they finally settled in what we know today as the old Cherokee country, the contemporary southeastern United States. It is interesting to note in connection with the Keetoowah tale that some scholars also believe that the Cherokees originated in South America. They cite cultural evidence, particularly the Cherokee double-weave basket-making technique, a technique, they say, that is unique in North America to the Cherokees, but is fairly common in South America.

Combining the evidence of several of these tales and theories, it seems reasonable to say that the Cherokees likely came from South America and migrated north through Central America and Mexico, eventually stopping for a time in the northeast along with the other Iroquoian-speaking tribes there. (If we take into consideration the story from 1717, we might even say they migrated as far north as what is now Alaska before turning south and east again.) Then following a long period of warfare with those people and with the Delawares, they moved southward again, settling in "the old southeast."

At best, origins are obscure. We tend to believe what we want to believe. Often, it seems, even scientific-minded individuals work very hard to "prove" what they have already decided is the "truth." Let it suffice here to say that no one of the origin stories referred to above can be proved. Some are legends. Others are theories.

– Excerpted from The Cherokee Nation: A History by Robert J. Conley.