

Chiefting in Cherokee

Commodifying a Culture to Save It

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BY THE TIME WE ROLLED INTO CHEROKEE, North Carolina, Nick and I had been crisscrossing the country for three months straight, scouting for stories for an educational website called the Odyssey. Because it was the year 2000—that is, when cell phones were mostly used for urgent matters—we had filled our endless road hours with conversation. But

neither of us said a word as we cruised down Tsali Boulevard, the town’s main strip. We just stared and shuddered.

Practically every storefront sign featured a Native American rendered in caricature above a business name like MIZ-CHIEF, SUNDANCER CRAFTS, or REDSKIN MOTEL. Store pillars had been carved and painted as totem poles. Teepees crested the rooftops. Souvenir shops advertised two-for-one dream catchers. Mannequins dressed in warbonnets were posed mid-wave in the windows. Nick and I had traveled here to research Andrew Jackson’s forced relocation, in 1836, of the Cherokee from their ancestral lands to territories out West. At least 4,000 Cherokee died from hunger and exposure along the way. We wanted to learn how the tribe had processed this tragedy, how they explained it to their children. Indigenous Disneyland wasn’t what we’d had in mind.

Up ahead, a billboard touted LIVE INDIAN DANCERS in a tawdry font. Nick pulled over so we could join a flock of tourists gathered around a teepee propped on the side of the road. Two men wearing elaborately feathered headdresses were midway through a performance. The younger one was playing a drum; the elder was telling a story about the *Titanic*. Too many people had crowded into the life raft, he said. They were sinking. Three brave men needed to make the ultimate sacrifice. A French man shouted, “Vive la France!” and jumped overboard. Then a Brit yelled, “Long live the Queen!” and jumped overboard. Finally, a Cherokee stood up. He looked around at all of the passengers and said, “Remember the Trail of Tears!” Then he grabbed a white boy and threw *him* overboard.

I laughed. The white tourists did, too. Nick, an Oglala Lakota Sioux from the Pine Ridge Nation in South Dakota, did not, which altered how I might otherwise have reacted to the next joke, and the one after that. Again and again the storyteller mocked his audience, and again and again they chuckled on cue. I didn’t know what to make of this. Were these jokes undermining the significance of the tribe’s calamities or in-



tensifying them? And was laughing a sign of our complicity, or was it a strange way of seeking karmic forgiveness for the atrocities that some of our ancestors had committed against theirs?

No time to contemplate: Live Indian Dancing had begun. The storyteller took over the drum and started chanting while his younger partner stepped into the center of the circle of listeners. He wore regalia—war paint, dozens of beaded necklaces, a headdress and bustle made of turkey feathers—over faded Levi's and sneakers. For about a minute, he shuffled his feet and bobbed his bustle as the tourists took pictures. When he bowed, the storyteller passed around a basket, which the audience filled with bills and coins.

I had witnessed touristic practices ranging from the questionable to the degrading the world over, but this struck me as something dangerously complex. Self-exploitation? I turned to Nick for guidance, as he was my de facto barometer for what was morally acceptable in Native America. He clenched his jaw in anger.

When the last tourist departed, we marched over to the performers. Though just nineteen years old, Nick had inherited formidable oratorical skills from his grandfather (who provided legal counsel for the American Indian Movement) and mother (who won the 1993 Goldman Environmental Prize), so he did our talking. One by one, he ticked off every instance of cultural misappropriation we had encountered there: how, historically, the Cherokee had never lived in teepees, raised totem poles, or performed the Sun Dance, and how they had certainly never worn that style of headdress. What gave these men the right to profit from traditions not their own?

The storyteller shook his tip basket. He fed his kids with this money, he said. White people, they didn't know anything about Indians. He was educating them.

"How are you doing that? You are totally misrepresenting your history."

He looked Nick in the eye. "You say you're Lakota, eh? Do you speak the language? Do you know the dances and the ceremonies? I do. But I don't do them here. They're too sacred."

And just like that, our righteous indignation fizzled. No, Nick did not speak Lakota—for the same reason that I, a Chicana from South Texas, did not speak Spanish. Our elders had suffered so much discrimination for using their mother tongues that they'd declined to pass them on to us. Although Nick and I had been hired by the Odyssey to represent our communities, we couldn't actually talk with many of our elders. What, then, gave us the right to question these men? They knew their culture, which was more than we could say about our own.

Sensing that he'd hit a nerve, the storyteller invited Nick to sit with him, then picked up a drum and started singing. After a while, Nick joined in. They sang song after song together, until the next flock of tourists arrived. When the storyteller rose from the bench to open a new show, we slinked away.

In the year that followed, I drove more than 45,000 miles across the United States with Nick and other colleagues. Nothing affected me like that Cherokee trip. From that day forward, whenever I began another essay about Chicanidad, or wore a rebozo to a reading, I thought of those buskers dancing for tourists on the side of the street. Was I also commoditizing my culture when I performed my identity, or was I offering reverence to my ancestors? Could anything profitable be authentic? Did any of this matter if you were simply trying to survive?

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, I RETURNED TO CHEROKEE TO continue the conversation that had troubled me since that first visit. The timing was auspicious: The town was celebrating its 103rd annual fair, a five-day homecoming festival complete with parades, stickball matches, a Ferris wheel, and a late-night "Pretty Legs" contest featuring scantily clad men in drag. Along Tsali Boulevard, all the teepees were gone, swept from the rooftops and plucked off the streets. The Old Squaw Moccasin Shop had been replaced by a string of upscale stores promoting "authentic Cherokee crafts." Only one or two bonneted mannequins were left.

These changes were yet another instance of the remarkable agility of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. This nation was founded by some of the hundreds of Cherokee who escaped Jackson's death march by fleeing into the mountains, as well as by those who'd been granted the right to stay through treaties. In the 1870s, they bought back their ancestral territory from the US government, via a land trust called the Qualla Boundary. White outsiders arrived a few decades later, looking to invest in baskets and blowguns. Sensing an opportunity, the white-run Bureau of Indian Affairs organized the tribe's first fair in 1912, which drew even more visitors. Once the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway opened in the 1930s, cabals of federal, state, and county officials, local businessmen, and a handful of Eastern Cherokee decided to capitalize on the tribe's heritage.

First came an outdoor theatrical production called *Unto These Hills* that, according to an early promo, dramatized "the epic clash of the red man and the white man," from colonization to the Trail of Tears. The show reeled in more than 100,000 spectators during its 1950 inaugural season, and has run every summer since. Next came the Oconaluftee Indian Village, where historical reenactors portrayed daily life circa 1759 for clusters of camera-wielding tourists.

Competition started brewing on the other side of the Smokies when Tennessee towns like Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge began to hype up their own heritage. White, middle-class families came in droves for the moonshine stills, wax museums, and attractions like Rebel Railroad (now Dollywood), which at the time offered train rides culminating in "wild Indian attacks." Refusing to be outdone, the Eastern Band sanctioned Frontier Land, a Wild West theme park that also featured Indian raids. By the early 1960s, the town of Cherokee was awash with tomahawk shops, campgrounds lined with teepees, petting zoos where kids could play tic-tac-toe with roosters, and round-the-clock Live Indian Dancing. Whereas earlier ventures like the Oconaluftee Village aimed for historical accuracy, these newer businesses

touted the Hollywood version of the American Indian. Totem poles abounded. Not only did this satisfy tourists, it enabled the Eastern Band to keep their real traditions private and therefore sacred. Once the Red Power civil-rights movement elevated Native consciousness in the late 1960s, however, more and more Eastern Cherokee questioned the persona the tribe had put forward, worried about the psychic harm it could cause. Tourism also changed, with heritage seekers wanting to learn more, say, about their great-great-grandma rumored to have been a Cherokee princess.

Then, in the eighties, air travel became more affordable, triggering a nationwide decline in family road trips that parched the tribe's economy. The time had come for reinvention. In 1997, the Eastern Band launched their most ambitious transformation yet: On the grounds where Frontier Land once stood, they erected Harrah's Cherokee, North Carolina's first casino. Suddenly, the Eastern Band had the cash flow not only to fortify their infrastructure—education, health care, housing, public safety—but to revamp their image as well. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian underwent a \$3.5 million renovation the following year. In 2006, the tribe hired a Kiowa playwright, Hanay Geiogamah, to revise *Unto These Hills* according to Native storytelling traditions and to write better roles for community members. (The original script was composed by a white graduate student at the University of North Carolina.) A few years later, the tribal government began offering incentives to local businesses to more accurately represent Cherokee culture. This explained the dearth of teepees along Tsali Boulevard, replaced by new facades hewn of wood and stone.

Vintage Cherokee lives on, though, in the buskers who pose for tourist photographs. Known locally as "chiefing," this profession dates back to 1930, when a souvenir shop called Lloyd's asked its employees to stand outside in their regalia to draw in customers. After Polaroid popularized instant cameras in the late 1940s, some Eastern Cherokee (as well as members of other tribes) began dress-

ing up and standing along the thoroughfare, beckoning motorists to stop for photos. The first buskers saw a direct correlation between the ostentation of their outfits and how much tourists tipped them, so they abandoned the modest, traditional dress of the Cherokee in favor of the splendid warbonnets of the Plains Indians. Although chiefing soon became one of the town's biggest attractions—one busker, Henry “Chief Henry” Lambert, claimed to be “The World’s Most Photographed Indian” after posing by his roadside teepee for almost six decades—it was also one of the most controversial, with some members challenging the profession’s dignity. Over the years, the tribal government has tried curtailing the practice through increasingly stringent regulations, allowing only enrolled members to chief inside the Qualla Boundary, requiring annual permits, and, most recently, restricting busking to a handful of three-sided huts equipped with a raised stage, a ceiling fan, and benches. Anyone caught busking outside these huts can be slapped with fines, even arrested.

AT 9 A.M. ALL THE HUTS AROUND TOWN WERE STILL empty. Over by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, two members of Cherokee Friends—the museum’s ambassadorial wing—stood in a shady alcove, knapping flint and whittling wood. Both men had shaved their heads smooth except for short ponytails at their napes. The younger of the two was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt; the other, who introduced himself as Sonny Ledford Usquetsiwo, wore a belted white trade shirt over red leggings. They both wore metal bands around their wrists and coin-sized gauges in their earlobes. “The reason we are here is to answer questions,” Usquetsiwo said grandly, drawing out each vowel in Appalachian fashion. “Here, we are in our culture 24-7.”

I complimented his regalia, and he nodded, rubbing the red-and-black engravings that covered his arms. “My markings, it is earned. It is not a fad. I’m not just going to the tattoo parlor and getting it done. It is between me and the elders. They are called warrior marks. Real war-

riors give us that status because we are fighting for our culture. Lots of what is written about us is wrong, like the way we look. You see us on the internet, but that’s Plains Indians, not us.”

I asked Usquetsiwo whether chiefing had contributed to the public’s misperception of his tribe. He stared at me for a moment before resuming his flint work. “Gradually, they are easing them out. In a way I agree with [chiefing] because I know the people who do it. Yet another way I don’t because they are using warbonnets of another tribe. Our elders will not let us stand on the side of the street trying to get people to take a picture for a tip. We have been told, ‘We don’t want to see you out there.’”

At that, the younger man, Mike Crowe, looked up. “My dad chiefed on the side of the road, didn’t he?” he asked.

Usquetsiwo nodded.

“They do what they had to do,” Crowe said. “It was a smaller job market then. They just tried to make cash to feed themselves. This day and age, I’d rather see them take the time to research our people and give an authentic view. If they are trying to make an honest living, I can’t be mad at that.”

Usquetsiwo’s diplomacy was one of many examples of how the Eastern Cherokee practice what’s called a “harmony ethic,” which values consensus and not causing offense. I’d learned about it in the time between my visits here, and noticed how it manifested not just in the people but in the attractions, too. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, for instance, is said to be one of the first in the United States to require visitors to contemplate human suffering. And certainly its mural of the Trail of Tears—of families trudging through snow in mournfully blue strokes—was proof that there is no painless way to tell the story of Native-American displacement. But I sensed, too, how the harmony ethic tempered other displays, like one about Cherokee firepower, where a placard listed various excuses as to why the colonists had traded weapons to the Cherokee that were “cheaply made, required special shot, and broke easily” before landing on what made the most sense—namely that “the colonists did not want the In-



dians to have equal firepower.” A timeline of the Cherokee school system, meanwhile, spared you from the horrors of a century and a half of “Indian residential schools”—during which 100,000 indigenous children were forced to attend Christian boarding schools, where they were beaten for speaking their mother tongues and berated for professing their traditional beliefs—by solely noting how, in the 1930s, American public opinion shifted to support the idea that “removing five and six year olds from their families was inhumane.” This was, in essence, a museum about an attempted genocide, but you couldn’t tell from its rhetorical restraint.

I found a more wrenching experience at the Cherokee Bear Zoo. For decades, animals played a large role in Cherokee tourism in the form of trained-chicken acts and pose-with-a-bear-cub stands, most of which have been phased out. One of the zoos in Cherokee, Chief Saunooke’s Bear Park, was shuttered in 2013

after the USDA fined it \$20,000 for deplorable conditions. Tribal elders have sued the Cherokee Bear Zoo as well, contending it violates the Endangered Species Act. (A court ruled otherwise in March 2016, but a PETA campaign against the zoo continues.)

At the entrance were the sounds of more prerecorded flutes and a vendor selling paper trays arranged with apple slices, a piece of white bread, and a leaf of iceberg lettuce. I sidestepped a trash can with a sign that read *DON’T SPIT IN THE BUCKET*, then peered over the railing. Twenty feet below, bears paced inside tiny concrete pits. Black bears, brown bears—nine in all. The closest one, a grizzly, was standing on his hind legs and staring up at a couple of kids with cell phones. “Lookit!” one shouted, laughing and snapping a photo before dropping an apple slice into the bear’s open mouth. The animal’s teeth were jagged and yellow. His mate stretched out beside a stack of tires that held

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aloft a log topped by an overturned garbage can. A few feet away, a dripping pipe replenished a tub of water. That was it, in terms of amenities: no plants or grass or even dirt. The kids tossed down a lettuce leaf that alighted by the paw of the prostrate bear, which batted at it listlessly while they laughed and took her photo.

BY NOON, THE STREETS HAD FILLED WITH FAIRGOERS, but the huts were still empty. On Paint Town Road, I noticed a tattoo parlor flanked by a two-story fiberglass Indian wearing half a headdress and white streaks on his cheeks. I walked inside. A bald man with a goatee looked up from behind the counter. I confessed that I’d driven 300 miles to meet some roadside chiefs but hadn’t found one yet.

“I did it when I was ten,” he offered, adjusting his glasses. “I tanned a lot better then.”

His name was Robin Lambert, and he hailed from three generations of chiefs: His grandfather, his uncle, and he and his brother all busked at one point or another—his uncle, in fact, was none other than Chief Henry. Was it true that the famed showman had put five kids through college by chiefting? Indeed it was, Lambert said, and not only that, but one of those sons—Patrick Lambert—had just been elected “real chief,” or the Principal Chief of the Eastern Band, by a landslide last month.

“So, I guess that makes you an advocate?”

“When you go to Disney, you want to see Mickey Mouse. When you come here, you want to see Indians,” he said with a shrug.

Lambert stepped out from behind the counter. His arms, legs, and neck were so intricately tattooed that I couldn’t help asking which mark had come first. An eagle, he said, but it got covered a while back. His clients, Native and white alike, tended to request animals, feathers, or portraits of Indians. But not

every request was honored. “[White] people will come in and say their great-grandmother is Cherokee and they want a tribal seal, but I won’t do it,” Lambert said. “Some will get offended, but then I’ll tell them that to do that, I’d need to make markings on their face. And then they’ll say no.” Lambert didn’t do this out of rudeness; for many tribes, refusal is a political stance, a way of asserting sovereignty. Here in Cherokee, it can even trump harmony.

Down by the Burger King, I met Mark Hollis Stover Jr., another legacy roadside chief, whose great-grandfather, grandfather, and mother had all been in the business. A tall and slender man, Stover wore an orange ribbon shirt topped by a breastplate of beads shaped like elk bones. An otter pelt was slung across his back and his head was crowned with a “porky roach” (a headdress bristling with porcupine and deer hair). He’d just opened his hut for business and was still arranging beaded bracelets for sale, but he took a moment to tell his story. He grew up in Atlanta—“the only Indian I knew,” he said—then “got in a little bit of trouble” before moving to Cherokee and finding his passion: dancing. A champion in the Men’s Southern Strait Dance on the powwow circuit, Stover said he enjoyed chiefting because it allowed him to live by his art. “That’s all I want to do, is dance.”

The hardest part of his profession was, as he put it, the “stupid questions. They gawk at you. They say *woh-woh-woh*,” he said, padding his palm against his mouth. “They ask, ‘Are you a real Indian?’ They think we still live in teepees.” He tried to view these annoyances as opportunities. “I get to educate ignorant people who watch TV all day. Kids come up all scared of me, and I show them my jewelry and say, ‘If you take a picture with me, you can pick a piece.’ They see we are just like everybody else.”

Listening to Stover, it seemed the Eastern Band’s biggest obstacle to promoting a more ac-

curate view of their culture might be that their fabricated attributes had become tradition in and of themselves. When *Unto These Hills* made its revisionist debut, for instance, some community members protested, saying they liked the old version better, despite its inaccuracies. And if a roadside chief was donning the same style of porky roach that three generations of family members wore before him, couldn't he legitimately claim it as part of his heritage? I shared this notion with Stover. He thought about it for a moment.

"I am just doing what I can to keep it alive," he said.

UNTO THESE HILLS HAD CLOSED FOR THE SEASON by the time I arrived, but the Oconaluftee Indian Village, an expanse of woods and streams and cabins that recreated eighteenth-century Cherokee life (pizza-and-hot-dog kiosk notwithstanding), was still open. Six hundred schoolchildren were somewhere on the premises, observing live dioramas, blowgun demonstrations, and basket weaving. Smoke curled from a hearth. Women pounded corn into meal. Men in leggings sharpened metal tools. An accompanying placard epitomized diplomacy: "Cherokee had a cure for every sickness and disease known until the introduction of smallpox," as if the disease miraculously appeared on its own before annihilating 90 percent of the first Americans.

The village's central feature was a ceremonial square marked by low walls of sand. The surrounding bleachers were named after the seven clans: Bird, Blue, Deer, Long Hair, Paint, Wild Potato, and Wolf. A performance was underway; every seat was taken. Historical reenactors danced until the ringleader gave the cue, whereupon they hopped up and down and said, "ribbit." The spectators, mostly schoolchildren, shrieked with delight. "This hurts me worse than it hurts you," the ringleader joked before speeding up his chants, making the dancers hop in double time. Afterward, he stressed that the Frog Dance we'd just witnessed was a social dance, not a ceremonial one. As with

most Cherokee traditions, the latter were too sacred to share with outsiders.

Once the show ended, I joined the children mothing around the ringleader, whose name was Freddy. Like the Cherokee Friends at the museum, he'd shaved his head bald but for a ponytail at the nape and had decorated his earlobes with gauges. A pair of bear paws dangled from his neck. Such striking features were likely why he was emblazoned on postcards sold across town, but he also radiated a luminous kindness.

Finally the crowd cleared out, which gave Freddy and me a chance to talk. I learned that he was the first in his family to graduate not just high school but college, and that he'd chosen the University of North Carolina because, when he was a boy, he found a Tar Heels raincoat in a box of clothes that a church had sent. He told me that he loved making art (mostly stone and wood work, but abstract art, too); that some of his family were "bad on drugs" but that his grandparents had "stayed me straight." He also said that October 17 was his last day here, because he had stomach cancer, and he would soon be undergoing chemotherapy treatment. "You can't rely on Cherokee Hospital," he said evenly. "There are no doctors there." Freddy was twenty-five years old.

Other reenactors gathered around. I asked them how they liked working at the village. Quite a bit, they said, though one grumbled about his wife greeting him in the morning with, "You going to go play Indian today?" They agreed that the hardest part was answering the same questions day in and day out: Where are the teepees? Do you have a car? Do you have a house? Where is the reservation? Missing from this list were, of course, the equally insipid questions I myself was asking. For there are three kinds of tourists who visit Cherokee: those who know nothing about Indians; those who think they know everything about Indians; and those who are aware of how little they know about Indians and want to be enlightened. What impressed me about the Eastern Band was how patient they were with us. Granted, they have an economic incentive to be tolerant, but so do plenty of other tribes, and



I couldn't think of another one that offered visitors half as many opportunities for connection. True, these interactions were highly contrived, but hopefully we were learning a little more about one another than if we'd all just stayed at home.

At one point a blond, blue-eyed boy raced up to a wall of sand and kicked it, causing a mini-avalanche. "Please don't touch that mound!" a reenactor shouted, rushing over. The child darted away but was soon dragged back by his father. "Say you're sorry," he demanded, pushing the child at the reenactor's feet.

Bending down on one knee, the reenactor looked the little boy in the eye and explained how the sand "is like the walls of our church. Would you want me going into your church and breaking something? No, you wouldn't, because it is your sacred space. The way our people would traditionally handle something like this is, the mom and dad would be held

responsible. They would be tied to a post. I know you are really young, but that is why I am telling you this. I want you to respect things."

The father gripped his son by the top of the head and led him away. As they disappeared around the corner, he smacked him.

HOWEVER JARRING IT FELT TO EXIT AN EIGHTEENTH-century Indian village and, twelve minutes later, saunter inside an Indian casino, the two are arguably equally authentic. Games of chance have long roots in Native America (some European travelogues describe tribes throwing bones for horses and weapons). Ever since the Seminoles initiated Hollywood Bingo in Florida, in 1979, tribes have opened more than 470 gaming establishments nationwide—businesses that generated nearly \$30 billion in revenue in 2015. Yet gambling has been contentious for many nations. In 1989, the Mohawk

Nation of Akwesasne nearly erupted into a civil war over the issue, with car bombings and shoot-outs that left two men dead. The consensus among the Eastern Cherokee I met was this: They appreciated their dividend checks—which lately had been averaging \$12,000 per member per year—and benefits like attending any college in the world entirely on the tribe's dime. Yet they regretted how the casino had transformed their community from a family destination into a gambling haven. Nonetheless, the Eastern Band had recently opened a second casino, near Murphy, North Carolina.

The casino in Cherokee was posh but not flagrantly so, which seemed appropriate given the local poverty rate (around 25 percent). The entire complex boasted a twenty-one-story hotel and a 3,000-seat event center, but kept the outdoor fountains and flashing lights to a minimum. The ringing, pinging machines on the lower level were mostly operated by an elderly crowd, an alarming number of whom were using oxygen tanks. Middle-aged players, many of them in sunglasses, packed the high-stakes poker tables on the second floor. The only Cherokee-specific item I could find anywhere was in the back of a gift shop, where a cabinet displayed the same kind of beaded bracelets that Stover sold, only for fifty dollars instead of five. At Swarovski, I saw a crystal that seemed buffalo-shaped, but when I asked the attendant, she pointed at its tiny bell and called it a cow.

On the way out, however, I noticed a massive Cherokee tribal seal hanging in the grand entrance. Something about it reminded me of a dazzling moment in 2006 when Seminoles dressed in traditional patchwork announced from a Times Square marquee that they had just acquired Hard Rock International for \$965 million. "Our ancestors sold Manhattan for trinkets," one quipped. "We're going to buy Manhattan back, one burger at a time."

THAT WEEKEND IN CHEROKEE, THERE WERE ROAD-side chiefs performing the Hoop Dance, the Fancy Dance, and the Friendship Dance beside a stuffed buffalo named Bill. There were road-

side chiefs juggling the needs of twenty tourists at once—some who wanted their kid's face painted, some who wanted a photograph, and all of whom wanted to see Live Indian Dancing and to know when did it start and was there time to run to the restroom first.

Most memorable was the chief in his early forties who presided over the hut by the post office. His name was Mike Grant. A compact man, he had painted his face black from his eyes down and slung a deerskin over his shirt. A fox pelt crested his head, its furry face inches above his own. He was busily displaying tomahawks while his partner, Tony Walkingstick, painted his own face green behind a drum.

"I want to project different periods of time, and not be like a powwow chicken having a seizure on a dance field," Grant said with a low drawl. "We try to bring back the original. Gourd dances. Rattles. Our historical society doesn't want us to bring it back because it is too sacred, but horse feathers! How are the young supposed to learn their culture?" His grandfather was Lakota, he added, and he hoped to bring their ceremonial dances down to Cherokee someday.

"Isn't that controversial?" I asked.

With a grin, he pointed to a nearby Ford F-150, where a Confederate flag strung on a pole dangled out of the truck bed. "We have family who died under them colors. We fly that flag proudly."

Indeed, a white Cherokee chief named William Holland Thomas led the 69th North Carolina Regiment of the Confederate Army, and many of his infantry were fellow Cherokee (who owned more black slaves than any other tribe). Although the rebel flag is flown by just a fringe group these days, I saw several during my visit—stitched on a teenager's denim jacket, plastered on a Cadillac, even used as the backdrop of a giant dream catcher hanging in a store.

Grant introduced me to his sons. The ten-year-old wore a deerskin, while the twelve-year-old sported a T-shirt depicting a potbellied crocodile that said SEND MORE YANKEES THE LAST ONES TASTED GREAT. Both were absorbed in the same cell phone. Grant explained that

chiefing was a big part of their homeschooling, since they could learn singing, dancing, and culture “all in one fell swoop.” “They make all these knives and tomahawks for sale,” he said. “They owe me four dollars or five dollars for cutting and a little more for materials, and not only do they learn culture, but math and business.”

At that, the sky released a downpour, sending a dozen tourists in brightly colored ponchos scurrying into the hut. Grant glanced over at Walkingstick, who had just donned a *gustoweh*—the feathered headgear traditionally associated with the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy—and announced that the show would now begin. No photos would be allowed during the opening ceremony because “we want you to witness with this”—he touched his eyes—“and feel it with this”—he touched his heart.

Walkingstick popped in a CD of wooden-flute music, lit a prayer bowl, and scattered a handful of tobacco atop the drum. As soon as he played it, more tourists entered the hut, cell phones raised and recording. He asked for blessings “for babies...for veterans...for Leonard Peltier.” The deerskin-clad son was called up and given two eagle feathers. Grasping one in each hand, the boy soared around the hut in bare feet, raising the feathers skyward in each of the four cardinal directions. Then he grabbed a tomahawk and stomped about, his torso parallel to the ground, his head turning side to side. I had no idea what—if any—of this was traditionally Cherokee, but I did know that, for nearly three-quarters of a century, the United States and Canada outlawed most Native ceremonies. Those that survived were conducted in secret by Indians willing to risk imprisonment.

A few songs later, Walkingstick rose to his feet. Scanning the crowd, he delivered a monologue about “Our Holocaust,” sharing how “there were 3,500 who were never captured, killed off, or conquered by the white man. We are their descendants. My relatives, my clan, our nation, we have never been tamed.” Across from me sat a man wearing overalls and a backward baseball cap that said MOONSHINE. His eyes welled with emotion. The woman beside me also looked transfixed,



leaning forward on her knee-high moccasins. She later told me she lived six hours away but visited Cherokee whenever she could to learn more about her heritage.

“We kinda reached the middle part of the show,” Grant said. “We are not paid by any entity. We will just pass the donation basket.” One by one, the tourists shook his hand and filled his basket. They seemed satisfied for having witnessed something “Indian,” and Grant and Walkingstick seemed satisfied for getting compensated.



I LEFT CHEROKEE FEELING AS CONFLICTED AS EVER about the ramifications of capitalizing on a culture. Yet I was reminded that, as preoccupations go, this one was mighty privileged, right up there with worrying about whether your touristic experience was authentic or not. Such matters generally become pressing only after a community has been freed from such crises as devastatingly high rates of domestic violence, unemployment, alcohol and drug addiction, and youth suicide—all of which rav-

age much of Native America today. Perhaps the most authentic thing to witness in Cherokee is how—despite their catastrophic losses during the Trail of Tears; despite their centuries-long struggles to retain their land, status, and dignity—the Eastern Band has managed not only to survive but to thrive, thanks in part to their willingness to reinvent themselves as needed. Indeed, their readiness to share so much with their former tormentors might be one of the most radical acts of forgiveness I know. ■