

Our Native American Heritage

By Dr. Opless Walker Cherokee Ambassador to Oklahoma
P.O. Box 342, Cookeville, TN 38503

A casual glance at the 1990 census of fifteen Upper Cumberland Counties may lead the reader to assume that only 511 Native American Indians reside in those counties. Furthermore, comparing the 1990 census with the 1980 census figures, one may conclude that they Indian population in those same counties more than doubled in the last ten years.

Unfortunately, the available census records do not paint a true picture of the number of Native Americans: i.e., those individuals who have Indian blood – all or in part – who actually live in the Upper Cumberland. In reality, the number of Native Americans in the area covered by the counties listed above is hundreds, perhaps thousands, more than recorded.

There are four basic reasons why the census doesn't reflect the true Native American bloodline population:

1. Many residents do not know that they have a Native American bloodline. These individuals may not be interested in their ancestry or they may not know how to research the subject.
2. A few people believe they may have Indian ancestors; however, they do not have actual proof.
3. Some residents can document their Indian Heritage; however, they do not consider themselves to be Indians for census purposes.
4. The majority of individuals think one must be full-blooded to be considered an Indian. It is not necessary to be full-blooded to be considered a Native American. For example, the Cherokee Chief during the infamous Indian Removal of 1838-9 was Chief John Ross, the son of a Scottish father and a part Cherokee mother. Chief Ross was only one eighth Cherokee.

A synopsis of the Cherokee history in the Upper Cumberland region will best illustrate the reasons why so many of the current population have Indian ancestry.

The Cherokees, after successfully pushing the Shawnees from the Upper Cumberland area, circa 1710, became the dominant force in the region. (1) The dependence on trade with the Europeans and the constant conflicts with the settlers moving westward put the Cherokees in a position of signing treaties with the U.S. Government.

In 1785, a treaty line ran from southwest to the northeast, passing between McMinnville and Woodbury, near Cookeville, and continuing just east of Livingston. (2) By 1805, this treaty was null and void, and the Indians were pushed into a small area which included southeast Tennessee, northwest North Carolina, and north Georgia. The end of this treaty paved the way for the formation of Overton and White counties in 1806.

Thomas Jefferson had, in 1802, proposed a plan, which would rid the eastern United States of all Native Americans.

The year 1828 saw two major events, which hastened Jefferson's plan of removal; the election of President Andrew Jackson and the discovery of gold in Georgia. (3) Andrew Jackson's hatred for the Indians was exceeded only by that of the people of Georgia. They placed such political pressure on the federal government that Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and ordered the Indians out of all areas east of the Mississippi River. Andrew Jackson said prior to his death that his greatest accomplishment was "the removal of the Indians from the eastern United States." (4) An upper Cumberland resident, Benjamin F. Curry of McMinnville, Tennessee was appointed superintendent of removal of the Cherokee Nation.

There were three categories of Native Americans who did not go west during the Indian Removal; the many Cherokee women who had married European men, the children of such marriages, and Cherokees who had escaped into the wilderness to avoid capture by the more than seven thousand U.S. troops which were sent against the defenseless Indians. (5) The Upper Cumberland counties had all three categories within their boundaries. The proliferation of these bloodlines has resulted in many hundreds of Native Americans being present in the Upper Cumberland's.

An example of the first two categories listed above can be found in the lineage of the Cherokee female who was given the name Frances Hammock. Frances was a full-blooded Cherokee who was born in 1812, and had married Issac Swallows of Overton County. This union alone would result in hundreds of descendants who have resided and still reside in the Upper Cumberland's.

This author's maternal grandmother, Sara Swallows (Buckner), was of this lineage. Sara Swallows was born in 1866 and later married Jacky Buckner of the Standing Stone Community (Monterey). Nannie Ellen Buckner (Bohannon) (Walker) my mother was one of the daughters of Sarah Swallows Buckner. The Indian bloodline is very evident in Nannie Ellen's features.

Elizabeth Swallows Murphy, the wife of James W. Murphy of Cookeville, TN, is also a direct descendant of the marriage of Frances Hammock and Issac Swallows. It was through the courtesy of Mr. Murphy, an accomplished genealogist, that I was able to prove direct descent from Frances Hammock Swallows.

I had a photo of Frances Hammock Swallows, but no documentation. Mr. Murphy had the documentation, but no photograph. By Chance, James and I were discussing our heritage when it was revealed that Frances Hammock Swallows was a common link.

There were several Native Americans who escaped capture during the Indian Removal and remained in the Upper Cumberland area. An example of this category lived just north of the present town of Monterey, TN until around the turn of the 20th century. As

the town grew, the Indians felt they need to depart. Jacky and Sarah Swallows Buckner were good friends of these Cherokee Indians. It is said that some went to North Carolina while others moved to White County.

During the early period of the 1900's an Indian name "Chief" White Cloud would return to Monterey selling herbs and other Indian medicines.

In the mid 1940's, a Cherokee family moved to White County from North Carolina. This family was the "Chief" Lone Wolfe (Ernest Grant) family. (6) Many Upper Cumberland residents are showing a greater interest in their Indian heritage. Although it is not an easy task to research one's ancestry, it may be more difficult to prove lineage to the Native Americans. Having a good family history is the first step in determining the extent to the American Indians.

The youngest of twelve children born to Nannie Ellen Buckner (Bohannon) Walker (1896-1971), Dr. Oplless Walker grew up in an historical environment. Being raised by a mother who was a direct descendant of the Cherokee Indians, Dr. Walker was taught many traits of the Native Americans.

On October 9, 1981, Dr. Walker, in appreciation for the research he had done to aid the Cherokee Indians, was made Ambassador to The Cherokee National during ceremonies conducted by Chief Ross Swimmer in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

County	1980 Indian Census	1990 Indian Census
Clay	8	11
Cumberland	22	137
DeKalb	9	19
Fentress	11	10
Jackson	1	19
Macon	9	35
Morgan	17	46
Overton	28	10
Pickett	16	4
Putnam	42	79
Smith	12	36
Trousdale	7	14
Warren	9	24
White	9	16
Van Buren	4	16
Total	225	511

Source: 1980 Census-Tennessee Statistician Abstract, 1990
 1990 Census-County and City Extra Annual, Metro, City and county Data Book,
 1992.

