

In the Presence of the Elders

By Don Wells

How often have you asked yourself, “if only I had recorded the knowledge and wisdom of my grandmother/grandfather, parents or whomever?” All too often, our relatives are gone and we lose a part of our family’s history and culture. I remember talking to my mother in her last years. She told me stories of her life that I had never heard before. I wrote down what I heard but it’s not recorded in her voice.

Five years ago, the Mountain Stewards began the Trail Tree Project which is now called the Indian Cultural Heritage Program. Our purpose was to start documenting what we were learning about Indian culture that had, for the most part, been lost or almost forgotten. Our efforts have been focused on researching, documenting and capturing in written and video format part of the cultural history of the Native Americans. You can’t simply show up at a Native American tribe and tell them you here to interview them and to talk about their culture. In the 400 years after Columbus arrived in the New World, 90% of the Native American population had perished in what is sometimes referred to as the American Holocaust. These deaths caused by our ancestors, which happened hundreds of years ago, seem to the Indians to have happened yesterday. The most important aspect of this cultural devastation is that many of the elders were lost. The elders are the keepers and teachers of the tribal culture. When you lose the elders you lose the culture.

Over the last five years, the Mountain Stewards have built lasting relationships with many tribes in which we are now treated as a friend. Through that trust, we are able to talk to the remaining elders and learn their wisdom, their knowledge of their tribal history and, in particular, their knowledge of living a close relationship with the earth. If everyone could sit at the feet of the elders and listen to their wisdom and their understanding of life, the world would be better off.

In 2008, the Mountain Stewards began filming interviews of tribal elders for the purpose of making a video documentary which is entitled, *Mystery of the Trees*. After four years we have 80 hours of interviews and background footage “in the can.” While our hope has been to develop a three part series on what we are learning, the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed are not yet available to complete the project. We are, therefore, developing the 30⁺ minute version of the story which we hope to have available in early 2013.

We have been filming interviews as opportunities open to key elders. This past July, our film crew traveled to Oklahoma to interview some elders we had not met before. Our nine day trip in the summer heat resulted in filming Wallace Coffey, Chairman (Chief) of the Comanche Nation, Sam Proctor, elder of the Muskogee Creek Nation, and some additional filming with Eddy Red Eagle of the Osage Nation. We also filmed many special sites related to the Indian history in Oklahoma. Out of the nine day trip, the film crew filmed seven days.

We were asked to come to Oklahoma initially by the Comanche Elder Council. We met with the Comanche Elders on 2 July to tell them about our work and to begin building relationships for further understanding of Comanche culture in the future. They have asked us to return in 2013 to make a presentation to all Shoshone speaking tribes (Shoshone, Comanche, Shoshone-Bannock, Paiute, Ute and other tribes) about what we are learning about their lost culture. On 3 July, we met with the elders of the Muskogee Creek Nation and have begun building long term relationships to further the effort in gathering information on Creek Indian culture. The Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Ted Isham, and one of the oldest elders, Sam Proctor, are already planning visits to



**Wallace Coffey
Chairman Comanche Nation**

the east coast to visit Creek Indian sites we and others are finding. One of the more interesting opportunities to learn from the tribal elders is at a conference in Atlanta on 9-11 November called Ancient Wisdom Rising 2012. The conference is being held at the Simpsonwood Lodge in Atlanta. Persons who attend will: (1) experience teachings, stories and ceremonies with traditional elders and wisdom keepers from around the world; and (2) restore your life's balance by igniting a heart-centered way of relating to others, your community and our living Earth. Two of the elders we have filmed and with who we are working, Sam Proctor (Muskogee Creek) and Jerry Wolfe (Eastern Band Cherokee Indians) will be participating in this event.



Sam Proctor, Muskogee-Creek

It is difficult to put into words the value and privilege of being in the presence of the elders. Suffice it to say that when you walk away from your time with them, you have a new sense of peace, understanding and appreciation for those who are more spiritually connected to the living earth.

In the Presence of the Elders – Part 2

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This past summer, we traveled to Oklahoma to meet with several Native American Tribes to begin to establish partnerships for the purpose of investigating and documenting historical sites related to a particular Indian tribe. The first partnership that was formed is with the Muskogee Creek Nation whose original homelands were in Georgia and Alabama.

The Creeks originally occupied all of Georgia in the 1600's up to about 1730 when the Cherokee's migrated into North GA and pushed the Creeks south. These two tribes fought many battles to gain control of the jointly occupied territory. The government finally stepped in to separate the two warring parties. As part of the 1817 Treaty with the Creeks and Cherokees, a boundary line was established from High Shoals, GA to Big Wills Creek in Alabama (Gadsden) to separate these two Native American tribes. Thus, after 1817, the Creek Indians were located south of the Gwinett/Dekalb County border to the Florida line and westward to Montgomery, AL. This is the area on which the Mountain Stewards – Creek partnership is focused.

Ted Isham, Executive Director of the Muskogee Language Institute and Sam Proctor, elder and spiritual leader of the Muskogee Creek tribe are the principal contacts for this work. They traveled back to North GA on 23 August and were hosted by the Mountain Stewards over the weekend of 24-26 August. During that time the joint partnership visited three Creek Indian sites in GA; one located on the Ochlocknee River just north of Moultrie, GA; the Chehaw Creek Indian Town site north of Leesburg, GA in Lee County; and the Indian Springs site in Butts County GA where William McIntosh, Chief of the Lower Creeks established a hotel on the crossroads of many Indian Trails. The Creek Indians in the early 1800's were a confederacy rather than a single tribe. They were organized into two primary groups, the Upper Creeks located mostly in Alabama and the Lower Creeks located in Georgia.

The first site visited near Moultrie GA on the Ochlocknee River was primarily used for fishing and hunting by the Creek Indians before they were removed. Artifacts dating as far back as 12,000 years ago have been found at that site. Mrs. Dolores Cooper and her late husband, Leon, collected the artifacts found on their property. They built a museum containing the collection and opened it to school, church and civic groups by appointment. Sam Proctor had visited this site 20 years ago invited by Leon Cooper. While there he had a dream in which "his people" talked to him telling him about a sacred site located on the property. In the morning, Sam got up and took Leon to the site as described to him



Sam Proctor and Dolores Cooper

in his dream. It existed just as he was told. On our trip to the property, we revisited the sacred site as well as toured the museum created by Leon and Dolores of the hundreds of artifacts found on the site. Jack Boedeker, a south Georgian historian on Creek culture, met us at the site to describe to us the Creek Indian history of that area of Georgia.

In Lee County GA are two Creek Indian Town sites, one of which we visited. North of Leesburg, GA near the junction of Rt. 195 and New York Road is the site of the Creek Town named Chehaw. This site was preserved by the D.A.R. in 1912. There is a large stone marker detailing the story of that town which dates to before 1700. In 1790, many members of the Creek Confederacy passed through that town on their way to St. Mary's GA where they boarded a ship and traveled to New York to sign the Treaty of 1790 ceding some of the Creek lands to the State of GA. In 1790, New York was the capitol of the United States.



Sam Proctor and Jack Boedeker at Chehaw

The last site visited was the hotel built by General McIntosh, Chief of the Lower Cheek Indians at Indian Springs GA at the junction of several major Indian Trails. In 1825, McIntosh and other members of the Lower Creeks ceded their remaining lands east of the Chattahoochee River to the State of Georgia. Members of the Upper Creeks had demanded they not ceded these lands. Sam Proctor's great-great-great grandfather traveled from the Creek Town of Tuckabatchy located near Montgomery, AL to Indian Springs to try and convince McIntosh not to cede these lands but he did not succeed.

Visits to more sites are now being planned. This visit and future visits by members of the Muskogee Creek Nation and the Mountain Stewards are being filmed, many as part of a documentary project of the Mountain Stewards Publishing Company.