

Sam Curren - A Spiritual Elder

The *Readers Digest* published stories years ago about “The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever met.” Had the writers ever met him, Sam could have been one of those stories. Sam is a quiet man who does not say much until you ask him a question and then he opens up and out pour stories you need to be ready to record. Sam’s Indian heritage includes Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw. If he had some Chickasaw and Seminole heritage, he could be considered an elder of the Five Civilized Tribes. Sam’s ancestors remained in Alabama and did not go on the removal; otherwise he would probably qualify as a federally recognized Indian. Regardless of how you determine the “Indian-ness” of a person, Sam is considered an elder of the Indian way of life. He is one of the few left.

Introduction

Sam’s heritage begins with his Creek great-great great grandparents, John Jacob and Mary Gibson Jacob. John is recorded in the Creek Indian roles. After their removal from Georgia and other parts of Alabama, the Creek Indians were forced to live on a triangular section of land on the east side of Alabama. Those living there were then forced to cede all of their remaining lands east of the Mississippi in the Treaty of Cusseta, 1832. The Creek Indians, at the time of the signing of that treaty, had the option of accepting a land patent, 160 to 640 acres, or moving to Oklahoma. They had to promise to be loyal US citizens as well as occupy and farm the land. Five years after the date of issue the patent would be final and the land would be theirs. Many Creek Indians chose to do this in lieu of going to OK. John and Mary Jacobs were one of those families.

In the ensuing four years, however, greedy land speculators began cheating the Indians out of their patents. By 1836, the Creeks had had enough. They went to war with the States of Alabama and Georgia in order to take back their lands. The US government sent in the Calvary and most of the Creek Indians were gathered up and marched to Oklahoma. Accepting their land patent, John and Mary Jacobs escaped the removal and remained in Alabama. Others of the Jacob family were not as lucky and were forced to move to Oklahoma.

His Cherokee heritage comes from Abraham Nation who married Rebecca in Oconee County, SC. Abraham, also known as Wolf Nation, was a Natchez Indian who had joined the Cherokee tribe. Rebecca, called Becky Great Eagle, was a full blood Cherokee. The Natchez Indians were driven from the Mississippi area by the French in the 1750’s. Many joined the Creek Indians in Alabama, some joined the Cherokees and others went as far as the Catawba tribe in the Carolina’s. Wolf and Becky Nation moved from SC to Jefferson County, AL (Birmingham) and brought their daughter Mary Nation with them. Mary married James Maynard Massey of French heritage and they had a son, Joshua who was Sam’s great-great grandfather. Joshua married Parteney Caldwell who was Cherokee. Their son, James C. Massey, Sam’s great grandfather married Mellie Jacob of Creek heritage and they had a son, Will Massey who married Annie

McKinney whose mother was half Choctaw. Will and Annie had a daughter Sarah Francis Massey who is Sam's mother. Sam said his mother and grandmothers all had dark skin, black hair and dark eyes and looked like full blood Indians.

By the time Sam was born in December 1936, very little of the Indian heritage in his family was being discussed since his father was not of Indian heritage. However, Sam's great uncle, George Massey, was Indian. He was also a medicine man. It was traditionally the uncle's job to teach the next generation and George began teach Sam about Indian medicine. Sam's mother supported his learning about the Indian ways and she added to his understanding of his Indian roots.

After the removal of the Native Americans to Oklahoma, a law was passed in both Alabama and Georgia which made it illegal to be an Indian. In the census one could be listed as white, black, or mulatto with mulatto meaning only a black and white mixed heritage. Families of Indian heritage who remained in Alabama did not want others to know. They hid their culture. They feared being removed to Oklahoma. Families with darker color skins would claim other nationalities such as Black Dutch or Black Irish. It wasn't until 1970's or 1980's that people began to speak out about their Native heritage. By then, a lot of what had been known in the family had been lost. For some knowing your Indian heritage no longer even seemed important. For Sam it was a different story.

Growing Up Adopting Your Indian Heritage

Growing up around his grandparents, great-grandparents and other relatives, Sam observed them following many of the "old ways" of their Indian culture. They made baskets out of pine straw, used oak and rivercane to make woven chair seating and used Indian medicine formulas to treat sickness. His Uncle George taught him how to make a Creek bow and arrows of river cane with turkey feathers for true flight. George did use steel for the point in lieu of rock arrowheads. He could shoot rabbits with that bow and arrow and taught Sam those skills.

As Sam grew into his teen years, there was a growing sense in him that his Indian heritage was very important; that he was being called to learn everything he could about it; and perhaps even adopting the ways of his ancestors. His great uncle's teaching about medicine was a start but he wanted more. Beginning in the summers of his high school years, Sam started going to the Choctaw Reservation in Choctaw, MS. There he spent his summers learning the old ways of his people under the instruction of the elders.

As a teenager growing up in South Georgia in the 1950's I was given more freedom than children have today. For me, if I was home by supertime everything was fine. But, even in those more relaxed years, it is hard to imagine a child telling his parents that he felt called to leave home for the entire summer. That's what Sam did. He told his parents that he was going to ride a bus, walk or hitchhike 170 miles to the Choctaw Nation in Mississippi and that he would be back at some point. He said he told his parents: "If you don't hear from me, I am fine. If you do hear from me, it's because I need money."

Now, imagine a child showing up at the Choctaw Indian Reservation, not knowing anyone, and asking the elders to teach him the old ways. Sam did that. He was taken in by the Williams family. Rabbit and Nelly Williams were full blood Choctaw Indians. Nelly did not speak English and her husband only spoke a little bit of English. Their son, Peter Williams, became Sam's best friend. From that welcoming family, Sam began to learn Choctaw ways of life and the language. Peter was studying to be a medicine man and Sam followed along. However, Peter turned away from becoming a medicine man and went on to do other things. Over the period of several years even after high school, Sam continued to travel to Mississippi to learn more about his heritage and to expand his knowledge of living in the "old ways" of the Indians. He learned the language, the songs, the ceremonies and more. He continued learning about the sacred medicine formulas for healing and calling on the spirits for help with the healing. His friend, Peter Williams, came to live with Sam's family in Alabama for a year in order to help him continue learning the Choctaw ways.

Knowledge of the sacred formulas of Indian medicine is reserved only for those that are called to be an Indian medicine man. These people are selected from a few who exhibit the gifts of the spirit and who are willing to spend decades learning those formulas. Sam was unusual. He was not a member of the tribe and had not gone through a tribal selection process. However, someone, perhaps his Uncle George or friends at the Choctaw reservation, saw in Sam the spiritual gifts necessary for becoming a medicine man. He was taught this knowledge.

The deeper spiritual understanding inherited by Sam is not well understood and is seldom spoken about by Native Americans to anyone who is not native. William Winn, who is an authority on Creek Indians in the Chattahoochee Valley, wrote a book entitled "The Old Beloved Path, Daily Life among the Indians of the Chattahoochee River Valley." In his book Winn said, "Special individuals called *keethlulgi* or "knowers" among the Indians are considered to be invested with spiritual powers beyond the ordinary." He went on to say they were not a shaman but rather someone with a rare and exceptional gift with deep spiritual and psychological wisdom and a sort of second sight. Winn surmises in his book that the *keethla's* main function seems to have been to help restore order or balance with nature. A Muskogee language scholar said that they would write the word as *kerrvlke* for the group of knowers and *kerry* for a single knower.

The gift of *kerry* or *keethla* appears to be an inherited gift with certain family members having varying aspects of the gift. Sam's Uncle George had this gift and possible others in his family; but, few practiced the medicinal healing. It has been observed that some of the people with this gift can speak to the animals and to the dead. Sam told us his friend Sam Proctor, a Muscogee-Creek elder and medicine man could stand out in a field and, using his Creek language, call to the animals. Birds of various species, sometimes including eagles and four-legged animals of all sorts would appear near him when he called.

Although Sam had the gifts of *keethla* and had the skills of a medicine man, he was, in fact, living in a white-man's world. There, these gifts were not understood and were frowned upon if

discussed in public. A century earlier, he might have been called a witch or sorcerer and possibly killed. Even today, Sam does not advertise or talk about his gifts except to those who understand and believe or with those searching for healing who seek him out.

Caveat – Prescription Labels and Medicinal Cautionary Advice

Before discussing the old ways of Indian medicine, it is important to note that much of our medicinal practices today are caveated as to what healing you will experience and what side-effects are possible. The labels are papered over with lawyer developed “fine print” that limit our understanding of what medicinal cure we may achieve from taking any prescribed medicine or medical treatment. Indian medicine does not suffer from the paper mill of the pharmaceutical industry but it does have similar caveats.

In the old days of tribal medicine, there would be multiple medicine men in any one tribe whose knowledge of Indian medicine for each of them was limited to possibly a few hundred formulas. Thus, by having several medicine men in a tribe, there would be knowledge covering a thousand or more healing formulas and treatment for most ailments could be prescribed. Today, a lot of the Indian medicine formulas have been forgotten so if one medicine does not heal, there may not be knowledge of a better choice to be used in a more powerful healing procedure.

There are many books published with formulas of Indian medicine. However, it is best to leave the practice of Indian medicine to those who have been trained in its use.

Practicing the “Old Ways”

Sam told us about one of the first times he saw Indian medicine being used to cure someone. “Old Steve” was a Choctaw medicine man who lived in Alabama. Sam’s great grandmother was bitten on the heel of her foot by a rattlesnake. Her foot swelled up and started to look like they might have to cut it off in order to save her. “Old Steve” made a small box of cedar wood and put Snakeroot in it. Snakeroot is a common plant Native Americans knew as an antidote for rattlesnake venom. He put her foot in the box and tied the box around it. Her foot was well in about four days. Sam said he now knows how to use that treatment for snakebites. There are at least four plants known as snakeroot. The herbaceous perennial plant that Sam says “Old Steve” used is Snakeroot Master, *Eryngium yuccifolium* (button eryngo, button snake-root, or rattlesnake master).

Throughout his training in Indian medicine, Sam said he listened closely about how to gather and use the medicine. He wrote every formula down so he could remember how to use it correctly. Indian medicine men have said there are hundreds if not thousands of formulas and that no one medicine man can learn them all; Sam said that he learned as many as he could. He shares that knowledge today with those who seek him out. Throughout Sam’s 78 years, many have come to talk with him about these natural medicines and how they are to be used as remedies for diseases and ailments.

John was told by his doctors that his kidneys were shutting down and that he had diabetes which was killing him. His doctors told him they could do nothing more for him and he should go home to die. John contacted Sam and asked for his help. Sam listened to John's description of his medical problems. He then told John what medicine roots to collect and how to prepare them. John followed Sam's suggestions. He is alive today. His doctors want to know what he did to change his condition but he will not tell them.

A German businessman visiting the US learned about Sam's healing gifts and contacted him about his infected and failing kidneys. Again Sam heard the medical problem described and then went out into the forest to collect roots for the treatment. Days later German's kidneys were fine.

Sam has used red oak bark for sore throats and problems with the mouth, yellow root to ease pink eye on children, goldenrod tops to alleviate colds, and many other remedies for a variety of ailments. Today, Sam still practices his Indian medicine. He uses some of the medicine for self-healing or as preventive medicine. If you live in the south you know about pokeberries which grow wild and are a dark purple in color. If you get some of the berry juice on you, the stain will last for a long time. Except in the early spring, when the new greens can be eaten as salad, the pokeberry is considered a poisonous plant. But if you watch the animals in the forest, they eat the berries. What do they know that we don't know? Native American's have known for hundreds if not thousands of years that the pokeberry has medicinal powers. Today, medical researchers are looking at it as a possible treatment for cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, a chemical found in pokeberry juice has been used to successfully treat cancerous tumors in laboratory mice. The chemical is also being tested to determine if it can protect cells from HIV and AIDS. You can't chew the berry because the seed is poisonous but you can swallow the dried berries whole. Sam takes two berries a day as protection against cancer and other diseases.

Sam has shared about the pokeberries with some who have been diagnosed with cancer. Stephany, a friend of his who is of Delaware Indian heritage, has cancer. She contacted Sam for information about pokeberries. She has chosen to try them and is exhibiting signs of healing. Her red and white blood cells are now more in balance than before.

In addition to using Native medicines for healing, there are medicines to be used by those who come to the Indian ceremonial grounds for annual ceremonies and dancing. This medicine is designed for cleansing a person's spirit before he or she participates in the dances and ceremonies. This is similar to the use of the Black Drink. Several Native cultures have a ceremony in which the Black Drink is presented as a purifier to remove spiritual and physical contamination from the drinker, and as such it is never taken casually. Many tribes deemed it necessary to cleanse the internal body before important decisions had to be made by the tribe.

Spiritual Powers

Alikchi's have the power to heal. An Alikchi is a medicine man gifted with the powers of the spirits. They also possess the spiritual powers to perceive, to have a sense of a situation

unrealized by the average person. It could be called a “sixth sense.” There is little understanding of this power by most people and, sometimes people with this gift are thought to be weird or scary.

A recent example of this power was told to us by another friend of Indian heritage who was called to assist a fellow Indian cross-over to the next world. The person was in hospice care and the doctors/nurses had told his wife that he had days, if not hours to live. Our friend arrived at the man’s bedside to pray for his crossing over. But as he prayed, the spirits told him the man was not dying but that he should go home. Our friend told the doctors and the man’s wife what he heard from the spirits and the man went home. Our friend had lunch with the man and his wife months later.

In another example of the spiritual powers of those that are gifted, we were told this story by a 90 year old Cherokee woman about her son. As a young child, her son had some serious medical problems that required hospitalization. After treating the boy for some time, the doctors told the woman they had done all they could and she said, “They gave him up.” One day shortly after she had brought her son back to their cabin in the hills, she was looking down the path from her cabin when she saw the medicine man walking up the hill. She said, “Right then I knew my son would be well.” She went on to say, “The medicine man did not touch him or give him any medicine. He just stood there by him. Days later he was well.”

Sam also has the gift of the spirits. When people come to him, he often knows what is wrong with them before they tell him. His spiritual powers also bring him close to the animals as if they know each other. Sam showed one friend that relationship when they came upon a rattlesnake while they were out in a field. Sam put his cane down by the rattlesnake and the snake just crawled off. Had it been anyone else, the snake would have coiled and probably struck at the stick.

Scientists have thought for some time that we humans do not use all of the power of our brains. Numbers such as 10% and 25% have been thrown around but it is not clear how much of the brain is used. Whatever that number, it is clear that some have a greater understanding of the powers in the universe and can access those powers for good and for evil. Just imagine what could be done for medical science and for healing diseases if we had listened to the Native American’s and accepted their knowledge about plant medicine. Perhaps even their understanding of spiritual powers could be used for research or for healing.

All too often, those with many years of university training only listen to their colleagues who have more training than they do or only accept hypothesis presented by those same colleagues. In 1863, Francis Peyre Porcher, a Civil War Confederate doctor published a medical manual for use in the field to treat Confederate soldiers. The title of his book was, *Resources of the Southern Fields and Forests, Medical, Economical and Agricultural: Being also a Medical Botany of the Confederate States with Practical Information on the Useful Properties of the Trees, Plants and*

Shrubs. His book was based on the formulae of Indian medicine and he stated in his Preface that, "I here introduce a notice of upwards to four hundred substances, possessing every variety of useful quality." The purpose of his manual was to provide the field doctors information for treating diseases for which the doctors could not obtain a ready supply of manufactured medicines. Porchers' book was recently reprinted but today it is often ignored as a scientific wealth of knowledge. Someday, perhaps we will pay attention to what the first people on this earth can teach us.

Exploring the Indian Culture

Sam has been an integral part of a group of people in Alabama and elsewhere who have explored old Indian cultural sites, Indian Trails and other places of interest to the Indian people. He has written many articles about his exploration, some of which appeared in *Wild South*, a magazine published by Lamar Marshall in the 1990's and 2,000's. He also participates with many tribal elders and others in ceremonies at the Indian reservations and during exploration of Indian sites.