Cherokee Indians from Smoky Mountains

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THEY are the first native people who arrived in the Tennessee Great Smoky Mountains about A.D. 1000. They were believed to have been a branch of the Iroquois, later to be called Cherokee Indians, who moved south from Iroquoian lands in New England. Cherokee Indians can trace their history back more than one thousand years. Their society was based on the usual habits of the tribal clans. The first Europeans encountered them in 1540, when Spanish explorer Hernando de Sota led an exploration through Cherokee territory. By the time European explorers and traders arrived, Cherokee lands covered a large part of what is now the southeastern United States. Here are some of the answers to the many questions that may be bugging you at the moment.

Cherokee is pronounced "CHAIR-uh-kee." It comes from a Muskogee word meaning 'speakers of another language.'

The Cherokees are original residents of the American southeast, particularly Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Trail of Tears was the Cherokee name for what the Americans called Indian Removal. During the 1800's, the US government created an "Indian Territory" in Oklahoma and sent all the eastern Native American tribes to live there. Some tribes willingly agreed to this plan. Other tribes didn't want to go, and the American army forced them. Thousands of Cherokee Indians died on the Trail of Tears. It was a terrible time in history.

There are three federally recognized Cherokee tribes: the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the United Keetoowah Band in Oklahoma, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee in North Carolina. The Eastern Cherokee people live on a reservation, which is land that belongs to the tribe and is under their control. The Oklahoma Cherokee people live on trust lands. The Keetowah Cherokee do not have a land base. Each Cherokee tribe has its own government, laws, police, and services, just like a small country, though they are under the American law. In the past, each Cherokee band was led by one war chief and one peace chief. Cherokee chiefs were chosen by a tribal council. Cherokee war chiefs were male, but the peace chief could be a woman. Today, Cherokee tribal councils and chiefs can be either gender and are popularly elected, like senators and governors.

Most Cherokee people speak English today, but 20,000 people also speak the Cherokee Indian language. If you'd like to know a few easy Cherokee words, "osiyo" (pronounced oh-see-yoh) is a friendly greeting, and "wado" (pronounced wah-doh) means 'thank you.' The Cherokee language has an innovative writing system that was invented by the Cherokee scholar Sequoyah. Sequoyah's writing system is a syllabary. That means one character represents each syllable.

Like their distant cousins the Iroquois, the Cherokee Indians had an even division of power between men and women. Cherokee men were in charge of hunting, war, and diplomacy. Cherokee women were in charge of farming, property, and family. Men made political decisions for the tribe, and women made decisions for the clans. Chiefs were men, and landowners were women. Today, traditional Cherokee gender roles have diminished. Cherokee women can be chiefs too... and Cherokee men are sometimes farmers. However, modern Cherokee people still trace clan relationships through their mothers.

The Cherokee Indians lived in settled villages. Cherokee houses were made of rivercane and plaster, with thatched roofs. These dwellings were about as strong and warm as log cabins. The Cherokees also built larger seven-sided buildings for ceremonial purposes, and each village usually had a lacrosse field with benches for spectators. Many Cherokee villages had palisades (reinforced walls) around them for protection. Today, Cherokee families live in a modern house or apartment building, just like you!

Cherokee men wore breechcloths and leggings. Cherokee women wore wraparound skirts and poncho-style blouses made out of woven fiber or deerskin. The Cherokees wore moccasins on their feet. After colonization, Cherokee Indians adapted European costume into a characteristic style, including long braided or beaded jackets, cotton blouses and full skirts decorated with ribbon applique, feathered turbans, and the calico tear dress.

The Cherokee Indians made long dugout canoes from hollowed-out logs. Over land, the Cherokees used dogs as pack animals. There were no horses in North America until colonists brought them over from Europe. Today, of course, Cherokee people also use cars... and non-native people also use canoes.

Cherokee hunters used bows and arrows or blowguns to shoot game. Fishermen generally used spears and fishing poles. In war, the Cherokees fired arrows or fought with a melee weapon like a tomahawk or spear.

Traditional Cherokee art included pipe carving, rivercane baskets, gourd art, and pottery.

There are many traditional Cherokee legends and fairy tales. Story-telling is very important to the Cherokee Indian culture. You can find hundreds of Cherokee stories on the net, so don't forget to download them sometimes.