

Cherokee Ms. Chief: Her great-grandfather was one of the Native American Indians in the removal ordered by President Andrew Jackson in the 1830s who walked from their homes in the Southeast to newly designated "Indian territory" in Oklahoma in what came to be called the Trail of Tears. At the time, a significant number of people in America still questioned whether Native American Indians were human, or even had souls. In the 1787 US Constitution determining representation, Native American Indians are not counted as a person. (Article One: Section. 2)

Her father was a full-blooded Cherokee. Her mother who acculturated to Cherokee life was Dutch/Irish. They lived on a 160-acre tract of land that had been given to her grandfather as part of a settlement the federal government made for forcing the Cherokee to relocate to Oklahoma.

Wilma Pearl Mankiller born in 1945 was the sixth of eleven children and spent her early childhood on this tract of land. The family was destitute. Ms. Mankiller recalled she never really felt poor growing up, albeit her home had no electricity, indoor plumbing or telephones.

During World War II, the United States Army exercised eminent domain for military purposes to expand Camp Gruber and now took the Oklahoma land of 45 Cherokee families including the Mankillers. Her father thought he could make a better life in California and in 1956 agreed to relocate under the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Indian Relocation Program. This program to relocate Native American Indians was conceptualized by the official, now head of the BIA, who devised the program that interned the Japanese during World War II. The pattern in both broke up communities and families.

However, their life in San Francisco did not improve. Promises made to the family were not kept, money did not arrive, and jobs were few. Her father became a warehouse worker and a union organizer. The children were homesick and the family remained poor.

In an interview with The New York Times in 1993, Ms. Mankiller described the move as "my own little Trail of Tears...the United States government, through the BIA, was again trying to settle the 'Indian problem' by removal. I learned through this ordeal about the fear and anguish that occur when you give up your home, your community, and everything you have ever known to move far away to a strange place. I cried for days, not unlike the children who had stumbled down the Trail of Tears so many years before. I wept tears ... tears from my history, from my tribe's past. They were Cherokee tears."

At age seventeen, Mankiller married and moved to Oakland where she birthed two daughters and returned to school. She took night courses at Skyline Jr. College then at San Francisco State University while she worked for the Oakland public schools as a coordinator of Indian programs. While in the bay area she witnessed the 1969 Occupation of Alcatraz by Native American people of varying tribes.

The Occupation was to call attention to governmental injustices toward NAI people, and specifically to regain Indian sovereignty over the island in order to build a center for Native American Studies to include an American Indian spiritual center, an ecology center, and an American Indian Museum. The occupiers cited treatment under

the relocation policies and accused the US government of breaking numerous Indian treaties. It has been recorded that the US broke all treaties with the NAI.

The Occupation changed her life. She became aware the world needed to become aware of the plight of Native American Indian people who had rights, too.

The Trail of Broken Treaties, a cross-country protest from the west coast to Washington, DC the autumn of 1972, was designed to bring attention to Native American Indian issues, such as treaty rights, living standards, and inadequate housing. A position paper was drawn up to reestablish the sovereignty of the Indian Nations.

Mankiller divorced in 1974 and three years later, returned with her daughters to live on her grandfather's land in Oklahoma in a quest to help her own people. She took an entry-level job with the Cherokee Nation and volunteered in tribal affairs and in campaigns seeking new health and school programs. She earned a bachelor's degree in the social sciences from Flaming Rainbow University and took graduate courses in community planning through the University of Arkansas. She became an economic stimulus coordinator for the Cherokee Nation and focused on community self-help. When she got this position, there were no female executives and she had no agenda to become Chief.

In 1981 she founded and was director of the community development department of the Cherokee Nation that helped develop rural water systems and rehabilitate housing. She began to develop programs on the philosophy that NAI could solve their own problems. Her programs increased revenue to the tribe, and called attention to her and to her work. The tribe's principal chief, Ross Swimmer, selected her as his running mate in his 1983 re-election campaign.

While campaigning she received criticism—not for her political views but because she was a woman. She recalled it was the most hurtful experience she had ever been through, that some people felt the Cherokee would be the laughing stock of the all the tribes if they had a woman who was in the second highest position in the tribe. That said, she said, "I thought that the idea that gender had anything to do with leadership, or that leadership had anything to do with gender was foolish, and I could see no point in even beginning to try to debate that non-issue with anybody, so I just continued on." And continue she did.

Victory made her the first woman to become deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation. When Swimmer resigned two years later to become assistant secretary for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior, Mankiller succeeded him as principal chief, won office in her own right in 1987, and was re-elected with 83 percent of the vote in 1991. During her three terms, Mankiller reinvigorated the Cherokee Nation through community-development projects where men and women work collectively for the common good.

As the tribe's leader, she was both the principal guardian of centuries of Cherokee tradition and customs including legal codes, and chief executive of a tribe with an annual budget of \$150 million. One of her priorities was to direct much of this income back into new or expanded health care and job-training and educational programs. She oversaw the construction of new schools, job-training centers, and health clinics.

Her administration founded the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department, revived the tribal Sequoyah High School in Tahlequah, and saw a population increase of Cherokee Nation citizens from 55,000 to 156,000. "Prior to my election," said Mankiller, "young Cherokee girls would never have thought that they might grow up and

become chief."

Mankiller left office in 1995 due to health concerns but remained a force in tribal affairs and took a position as guest professor at Dartmouth College. She won several prestigious awards, is honored in the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame, inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Twenty years after the Occupation of Alcatraz, legislation was passed in 1989 to allow for a Native American museum to be built on the Mall in Washington DC where the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), a Smithsonian Institution, opened in 2004.

The Trail of Wilma Pearl Mankiller ended in April 2010.

Sources: <http://gos.sbc.edu/m/mankiller.html>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilma_Mankiller.