

The Silence Is Broken

Shirley Sperry

Writer's comment: Writing is not easy for me. It is very time consuming and requires much thought and analysis. When the words finally find their way to the paper, I feel empty and drained. Even a two-page paper can often take hours of thinking and more hours of writing and rewriting. I am surprised and pleased that the editors of Prized Writing chose to publish this piece, written for a summer NAS 180 class on Native American women.

I first learned about the Cherokee Indians in an eighth-grade history and civics class. Since then, I have continued my interest in Native Americans. When NAS 180 gave me the opportunity to study the contributions of Native American women, my original idea was to explore the lives of four women, but I soon learned that it would be nearly impossible to discuss the women without including some history of their tribes. When I evaluated the amount of time I had to complete this paper and the length restrictions, I realized that I had to narrow my topic.

A friend told me recently that one of her professors had wondered why there was a class at UCD on Native American women when there was no material on them and they were insignificant anyway. After completing the research for this paper and completing NAS 180, I would have to tell this professor that he is misinformed and is a victim of Eurocentric thinking. There is abundant information on many Native American women. Even though we, United Statesians, have imposed patriarchal ideas on essentially matriarchal societies, Native American women have continued to be a voice within their tribes.

My sincerest thanks and appreciation to my instructor, Annette Reed-Crum, for her guidance and her endless patience as she listened to my many ideas and new discoveries during the course of my research. And to my husband, Rick, who is not a very good critic but is a great supporter.

—Shirley Sperry

Instructor's comment: The 1993 summer course Native American Women (NAS 180) focused on the traditional, non-traditional, and contemporary roles of native women. In addition, we examined the effects of Euro-American colonization on native women and native responses. Over the years, non-Indians invented stereotypic images and misconceptions about native women. In the course we challenged these misconceptions by placing native women as active participants and presenting their issues.

In her paper, "The Silence Is Broken," Shirley Sperry indeed challenges certain stereotypical images of Native American women: the passive and submissive beast of burden. She weaves the history of Cherokee people with the lives of two important, respected, and assertive Cherokee women leaders, Nancy Ward and Wilma Mankiller. She explains the courage and intelligent

leadership of both "beloved" women. Additionally, she argues that one can not separate tribal history from Native American women.

Shirley and I discussed many aspects of this paper over iced tea at the Memorial Union, as well as in my office. During these discussions, and after reading the final paper, Shirley impressed me with the depth of her research. Instead of merely relying on a Ms. Magazine article about Mankiller, Shirley dove into the Cherokee Advocate, the official newspaper of the Cherokee Nation, to find further information, thus using primary source material. (Wilma Mankiller's autobiography, published in October 1993, was not yet available.)

Shirley's paper exemplifies the resilient strength of Native American women. She also shows that Native women have not remained silent. In addition, Shirley's paper demonstrates the intelligent resourcefulness of a skilled researcher, especially given the brevity of a summer course. Shirley Sperry is also a woman of courage and determination. I wish her all the best for the future.

—Annette Reed-Crum, Department of Native American Studies

Throughout the history of Indian-white relations, Indians have been fighting to save their land and traditions while whites have vacillated between solving the "Indian problem" by forcing Indians to assimilate into white society and a policy of extermination. The story of Native Americans is one of courage and resilience against overwhelming obstacles. Although many traditions and languages were lost and many tribes were completely annihilated, today's Native Americans are far from "vanishing." Native populations are on the rise, and Native traditions, long repressed, are being adapted to the reality of life in the twentieth century. This paper is about adaptation—the adaptation of the Cherokee tradition of the Beloved Woman to Principal Chief. The Beloved Woman, once a powerful voice in the Cherokee Nation, was silenced for centuries as Europeans and then "Americans" imposed their patrilineal system and their subordination of women on the Cherokees. Now, she has a new voice—Wilma Mankiller, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation.

One day in the Cherokees' unrecorded past, "strange white canoes appeared on the broad expanse of great water," hovering offshore for several days while observing the natives' reaction to their presence. Inasmuch as white to the Cherokees is a symbol of purity and spirituality, the new visitors were regarded as being "a pure race from the upper world"—as having come from heaven—thus, the tribesmen urged them to come ashore. A feast was prepared, tobacco purified and peace pipes smoked, and the visitors were permitted to purchase a small plot of land and reside with the Cherokee people. Regrettably, misunderstandings soon followed, and the tribe, believing that the strangers had put on white skins merely to deceive them, concluded that their unwanted visitors should be driven from their settlements. (Jones and Faulk 12)

Throughout the early days of first contact, Cherokees welcomed the white strangers. They welcomed the new tools, woven fabrics, and guns that made their lives easier. But the Cherokees and the Europeans had different values, economies, and social, political,

and religious structures. Where Cherokees valued family, clan, tribal relationships and responsibilities, respect, honor, dignity, self-sacrifice, and generosity, Europeans valued greed, individuality, and accumulation of goods. Where Cherokees lived in harmony with the earth, taking only what they needed to survive, Europeans sought to tame the earth and use her resources to make themselves rich. Where Cherokees governed by consensus of all the people (including the women), Europeans were governed by male representatives and majority rule (of only men). Where Cherokee society was matrilineal (lineage traced through the mother's clan) with women owning the home, land, tools, and children, European society was patrilineal (lineage traced through the father) with men owning everything (including their wives). Where Cherokees honored their women as the mothers of their continued existence and recognized their personal autonomy, Europeans expected their women to be "faithful, submissive, pious, and hard-working" (Tsosie 4, McLoughlin 9-11).

Although traditional Cherokee women did the farming and cared for the children while their brothers, uncles, and husbands hunted, their work was equally valued because they owned the fruits of their labor and contributed equally to the family's survival. Cherokee women enjoyed a personal autonomy not even dreamed of by European women (McLoughlin 10-11). Cherokee women had a voice in their government and spoke freely in council (Perdue 15). Some women chose to join their husbands and brothers in battle. Among the Cherokee, women who had performed an act of heroism and mothers of warriors were invited to join the society of "Beloved Women" where they were expected to participate in war councils and advise the war chief on strategy and timing as well as decide the fate of captives (Niethammer 172, Perdue 15).

Nancy Ward was such a woman and the "Last Beloved Woman of the Cherokees" (McClary 352). Nancy was born Nanye'hi sometime in 1738 to the Wolf clan. Her mother, Tame Doe, was the sister of Attakullaculla, the civil chief of the Cherokee Nation. Nothing is known of Nancy's father, although McClary speculates that he may have been a Delaware (353). The Cherokee Council selected Nancy to the position of Beloved Woman after the Battle of Taliwa in 1755. Her husband, Kingfisher, was killed during the battle and Nancy picked up his rifle and continued fighting, "rallying her side to greater exertion and to complete victory" (McClary 354, Tucker 192). As the Cherokees' Beloved Woman, Nancy spoke for the Great Spirit; she was the head of the Woman's Council, and a voting member of the Council of Chiefs. Sara Parker likens the position of Beloved Woman to that of justice of the peace; but the Beloved Woman, as the final judge of all disputes, was more powerful (22-23). However, life for the Cherokees was changing as a result of contact with white Europeans.¹

Disease and border wars reduced the Cherokee population by more than half between 1690 and 1740, leading to distrust (and possible assassination) of the traditional priests and medicine men who not only couldn't save their people from the European diseases, but often hastened their death. By 1776, the Cherokees had ceded 50,000 square miles to the irresistible tide of European settlement (McLoughlin 4-5, 17-18). It was increasingly difficult to maintain harmony within a nation whose people were constantly hungry and without adequate clothes. In their positions of leadership,

Nancy Ward and her uncle, Attakullaculla, sought a road that could be shared by the Cherokees and the white settlers (Parker 14). They chose to follow Cherokee legal obligations of hospitality and accommodation to mediate with the whites as they traded and negotiated for the tribe's material needs (Parker 24).

Nancy befriended a number of white settlers by sending them warnings of impending Cherokee attacks. The settlers around Watauga were spared twice as a result of Nancy's timely warnings. In the first attack, however, everyone did not reach the safety of the fort, and Mrs. William Bean (Lydia) was captured. Sentenced to burn, Mrs. Bean had been tied to the stake and the fire set when Nancy burst on the scene, scattered the burning brands, and proclaimed that as long as she was Beloved Woman, no woman would be burned at the stake. Nancy took Mrs. Bean to her home in Chota and, after a short stay during which she taught Nancy to make butter and cheese, Nancy's son, Fivekiller, and her brother, Longfellow, escorted Mrs. Bean back to Watauga. Soon after, Nancy bought some cattle and used her prestige and influence to convince reluctant Cherokees to accept the "white man's buffalo," thus adding dairy farming to the Cherokee economy (McClary 356-57).

Nancy Ward was always mindful of the Cherokee laws regarding hospitality. When a troop of American soldiers camped near Chota in the winter of 1780, Nancy ordered a small herd of cattle slaughtered to feed the men. In payment, the commander of the troop, John Sevier, ordered Chota burned to the ground and Nancy Ward and her family taken into "protective custody" on December 28, 1780. Nancy did not remain with her white friends for long, but returned with her family to help her people rebuild Chota (McClary 358, Parker 26-27).

Native American women could never understand why the federal government did not send the wives of the commissioners along to negotiate treaties. Nor could they understand the commissioners' insistence on negotiating land purchases from the men when it was the women who owned the land. In July 1781, Nancy was the featured speaker during negotiations for a peace treaty between the federal government and the Cherokee nation. McClary speculates that Nancy's appeal to the commissioners to "let your women hear our words" may have evoked the "chivalrous nature of the commissioners" (359) because the Cherokees were required to cede less land than originally intended. Nancy spoke to the commissioners again at the Treaty of Hopewell (1785), where the Cherokee Nation recognized that the Americans had won their independence from Britain and that the "New Republic now had sovereignty over all the lands including those occupied by the Cherokees." The treaty also stipulated that "Congress would not sanction or protect white settlers who might seek thereafter to settle on Indian lands." In her speech, Nancy voiced the hope of all Cherokees that "under the protection of Congress" there would be "no more disturbances" and that the treaty would bring a new era of friendship and peace for the Cherokees (Jones and Faulk 43, Woodward 105-106).

Neither federal agents nor the Congress effectively kept white settlers off Cherokee land or removed them once they were there. Not only did these settlers defy the President and Secretary of War by continuing to expand their settlements in Cherokee territory, but they also conducted their own form of guerrilla warfare to drive the

Cherokees from their land. Instead of removing the white settlers, the government coerced the Cherokees into yielding more land in the Treaty of Holston (1791). But peace eluded the Cherokees until Doublehead, who had succeeded Dragging Canoe in 1792, and the other rebellious chiefs were defeated by government troops in November 1794 (McLoughlin 22–25).

Peace did not return stability, harmony, and order to the Cherokees. Their population was reduced to “barely ten thousand.” They had lost three-fourths of their traditional land base. Men could not feed their families by hunting. Many lived on land that was far from that of their ancestors. Their ceremonies related to hunting, war, and communal harmony were meaningless. Many whites had come to live among the Cherokees. Although some accepted (or, at least, respected) Cherokee ways, many were “outlaws, renegades, bankrupts, and confidence men, eager to take advantage of Cherokee hospitality and of their women” (McLoughlin 31). These men, raised in the European patriarchal tradition, did not respect Cherokee customs, especially those related to the matrilineal society. They refused to allow their Cherokee wives to own property or live near their kin. Children of these mixed marriages carried their father’s name and inherited from him rather than their mother (McLoughlin 25–31).

From George Washington’s administration through that of John Quincy Adams (1789–1828), the federal government policy toward Indians was based on the “assumption that the Indians could and should be civilized to the point of being ‘incorporated’ or integrated as equal citizens on the land where they were now to become farmers” (McLoughlin 34). Key features of this policy laid the foundation for adaptation of traditional Cherokee customs and values. Government-assigned federal agents, who were given the task of protecting the Indian boundaries, encouraged the Indians to divide their communal property into individual tracts. Men were encouraged to become farmers while women were relegated to purely household matters (i.e., cooking, cleaning, childbearing, childraising, and the manufacture of cloth and clothing). The federal government further encouraged this transition by creating trading posts to “provide the Indians with a place to sell their furs and skins at reasonable prices or to exchange them for well-made tools for farming so that they would not be at the mercy of unscrupulous white traders” (McLoughlin 35).

Cherokee women found it easier to adapt than Cherokee men because they had traditionally prepared food and made clothing for their families. Instead of tending their fields, the women learned to grow, spin, and weave cotton into cloth, and they raised hogs, chickens, geese, and milk cows. Livestock sales replaced the bartering of pelts and skins. Between 1794 and 1810, increasing numbers of Cherokees gave up large-scale hunting. They left their villages and moved onto individual tracts of land where they “built log cabins, chopped down trees, dug up the stumps, plowed fields, and adopted the lives of husbandmen and farmers’ wives” (McLoughlin 68). Farming brought an end to Cherokee communal life. Nuclear families lived on isolated farms away from their traditional villages and relatives. More emphasis was placed on individualism and self-reliance. Women no longer had immediate access to other women to help with childbirth, childrearing, or sickness.

Many, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that intermarriage between Indians and whites would hasten the civilization process, and they promoted such alliances. They reasoned that children of these unions, trained by their white fathers,² would be better educated in missionary-run vocational training schools, "where Indian boys would learn to be farmers and artisans and Indian girls would learn to sew, weave, cook, and make butter and cheese while at the same time they were all learning to read, write, and do arithmetic" (McLoughlin 36). Because they could read and write in English, these children would also be better able to deal with federal government representatives (McLoughlin 68–70).

President Jefferson repeatedly told the Cherokees that "their progress would depend upon changing their laws of inheritance from tribal ownership and a primitive matrilineal system to fee-simple ownership and the patrilineal model of the white man." In addition, he advised the Cherokees that they would need "a judicial system to regulate 'contests between man and man' over private property and inheritance" (McLoughlin 106, 141). In 1799, the federal government and the Cherokee Council created a paid police force (lighthorse regulators) that acted to maintain order on its own initiative. By 1805, the Cherokees denied matrilineal inheritance by expanding the duties of the lighthorse regulators to include "protection to children as heirs to their father's property and to the widow's share" (qtd. in McLoughlin 140 and in Perdue 17). Cherokee marriage and kinship systems began to collapse as women increasingly lost control of their property, home, and children.

Little is known about Nancy Ward and the role of the Beloveds during this period. From what we know of her previous enthusiasm for new ideas and ways of doing things, we can assume that she was at the forefront of many of the changes. Nancy may have realized that survival of her people depended on their adaptation to certain European norms. She was very pragmatic and would not have rejected the tools, iron pots, needles, sharp knives, spinning wheels, and looms that made life easier for her people. It is clear, however, that Nancy would not have viewed the women's loss of power and influence as an improvement. Although she was quite old when the Cherokee system of clan-tribal loyalty was adapted to a more republican form of government in 1817, she and the other Beloveds probably influenced the provision in the constitution that husbands could not dispose of their wives' property (McLoughlin 225). Nancy recognized that there was no place in the new government for a Beloved Woman. She was too sick to attend the last meeting of the Cherokee Council in May 1817; nevertheless, Nancy's son, Fivekiller, delivered her resignation by returning the cane that had been given to her to represent her office. Nancy's voice was not silenced. Fivekiller delivered a speech signed by Nancy and thirteen members of the Women's Council. They pleaded with the new government on behalf of their mothers and sisters not to "part with any more of our lands but continue on [them] and enlarge your farms and cultivate and raise cotton and corn and we your mothers and sisters will make clothing for you which our father the president has recommended . . ." (Perdue 18). At the time of her death in 1822 (McClary 361), the Cherokee Nation had achieved a degree of acculturation unmatched by any other tribe.

By 1828 the Cherokees had established a government modeled after the federal government with a bicameral legislature. They had created a layered system of national courts. Many of their sons were being educated at the prestigious Cornwall Academy. They had their own written language and many Cherokees were bilingual. They had their own bilingual newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*. They had developed a successful plantation system and many owned slaves (Crum). But Cherokee women had lost their political power. Although women represented "[a]t least one-third of the heads of household listed on the removal roll of 1835" (Perdue 21), women no longer had a direct voice in Cherokee government. Finally, the federal government had silenced the women.

Cherokee women remained silent for 165 years. Now, they have a new voice. She is not the Beloved Woman, although she is beloved by her electorate. She is Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller.

Wilma Mankiller was born on her Cherokee father's allotted land in rural Oklahoma in 1946. Although her mother is Dutch-Irish, she traces her family in a direct line to Cherokees who were forcibly removed from their Appalachian homes in the winter of 1838-1839. She inherited her name from an ancestor who was an eighteenth-century warrior; but she has not lived the life of her ancestors. When she was twelve years old, Wilma and her family were relocated to San Francisco as part of the federal government's program to "urbanize" rural Indians. Wilma grew up far from her home and her people. Perhaps it was her concern for and dedication to native people that led her to study sociology at San Francisco State University (Whittemore 5).

Previously unable to articulate her feelings about the treatment of Indians, Wilma Mankiller found her voice during the Native American takeover of Alcatraz Island in 1969. Not for the first time, the Native leadership stressed that their treaty rights were ignored or violated, that tribes suffered from substandard health care and inadequate education. But this time, people, including Wilma Mankiller, were listening. These were things that Wilma could address. She began doing volunteer work among Native Americans in the Bay Area in the 1970s, and in 1977 she took her children and returned to Oklahoma (Whittemore 5).

Wilma overcame personal tragedy³ as well as sexual bias to become Deputy Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1983. In 1985, she became the first woman leader of any large tribe when she was sworn-in as Principal Chief after Ross Swimmer resigned to become the first Indian chief to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) ("Mankiller Sworn-in").

Wilma Mankiller leads a much larger nation than the one Nancy Ward left. The Cherokees are now the second largest tribe in the United States, with more than 130,000 enrolled members. Wilma controls an annual budget of about \$52 million. But, like Nancy Ward, Wilma Mankiller presides over a nation in transition. Cherokees suffer more health problems than the general populace, their youth drop out of school at alarming rates, alcoholism is a major problem, and they have double-digit unemployment. In an age that accepts cultural pluralism as a national goal, Wilma Mankiller says

that her greatest challenge, after a "couple hundred years of being acculturated," is to convince her people that other people do not always have the best ideas and that the Cherokee people can not only "live and work in a very modern, fast-moving society . . . but also celebrate who they are as Cherokees and maintain a sense of self" (Spaid).

Wilma Mankiller earned her status, not in a war with an enemy tribe or aggressive white settlers, but in a war with poverty, low self-esteem, health problems, and lack of opportunities. Although there is much to do, Wilma, a strong believer in community self-help, promotes projects where the Cherokees can help themselves improve the quality of their lives. As founder and director of the Cherokees' community development department, she procured a grant and helped one rural community construct a water line. She helped develop a \$9 million vocational training center (Whittemore 4). She gained direct control of \$6.1 million in federal funding to the tribe in an unprecedented agreement with the U.S. government ("Wilma").

Outside the Cherokee Nation, Mankiller has won numerous awards in recognition of her leadership. She was selected "the American Indian Woman of the Year for 1986" because, although she has received international fame, she is "genuinely concerned about her people and devotes her time to bettering their welfare" ("Mankiller Selected"). Her "notable contributions to American leadership and American culture" earned her the Harvard University American Leadership Award ("Challenge"). *Ms. Magazine* named her Woman of the Year in 1987 and, in 1988, *Ladies Home Journal* named her one of the "100 Most Important Women in America." She has received a number of honorary doctorate degrees: Oklahoma State University (first woman and only the sixth person to receive such an honor), Dartmouth University, Yale University, the University of New England, and Rhode Island College ("Chief Serves"). And, in 1993, Wilma Mankiller, with Michael Wallis, completed her autobiography, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*, which interweaves her life with the history of the Cherokee Nation.

Native American prophecies say this is the "time of the women" (Wall ix). This seems to be the case among the Cherokees. Cherokee women have again assumed their traditional positions in Cherokee society, although many are now working for the entire tribe rather than their own clans. In tribal programs for social services, education, medical, and economic development, 75 percent of the workers are women. Within the Cherokee government, too, women's voices are being heard. Led by Wilma Mankiller, eleven program directors are women and fifteen women occupy managerial positions; a woman district judge presides over the Cherokee National Court, another serves as associate judge; and five women sit on the fifteen-member tribal council ("National"). These new "Beloved Women" are educated and professional, but very much aware of their traditional responsibilities to their people. They are not fighting with guns, but they are fighting for their people using their "white" education and their Cherokee traditions.

Europeans, accustomed to a patriarchal (i.e., male-dominated), stratified, and hierarchical society "could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and [to participate in] decision-making at every level of society" (Allen

3). Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* maintains that it was a "patriarchal fear of gynocracy" that drove the colonizers to exert "every effort to remove Indian women from every position of authority, to obliterate all records pertaining to gynocratic social systems" (3) and impose their own European system on Indian societies. As a result, the Cherokee Nation developed a highly stratified, patriarchal society. Their women were silenced as Cherokee men fought to save their tribe, only to realize, too late, that they, too, were helpless, subject to the whims of the Great Father in Washington.

Attitudes and federal government policies, often based on what the dominant white society wants from the Cherokees and other Native Americans, have changed over the years. Exploitation of Native Americans is the hallmark of Indian-white contact. With their women silenced, Cherokee men lost the benefit of more thoughtful voices while their land was stolen and their culture, ceremonies, and language repressed or forbidden. From the period before removal to the current policy of cultural pluralism, Cherokee women have demonstrated the courage that *Webster's Collegiate* defines as the "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty." They have now returned to their proper place—Beloved Women of the Cherokee Nation. And their voices are loud and clear.

Notes

¹ European aggressiveness throughout the eighteenth century caused younger Cherokees to resist the efforts of older tribal leaders to keep the peace through accommodations and large land sales to the whites. These men, under the leadership of Dragging Canoe, Attakullaculla's son, continued to attack "illegal" white settlements within Cherokee borders (Jones and Faulk 36).

² I use "fathers" here because, while white men were encouraged to marry Cherokee women, Cherokee men were discouraged from marrying white women. In the latter case, the European patrilineal mind-set may have contributed to the belief that children of such a union would be raised as "savages" and thus would not contribute to the civilizing process.

³ An automobile accident in the fall of 1979 left her with a crushed face, broken ribs, and shattered legs. Miraculously, her recovery took just a year although it required many operations, including plastic surgery to repair her face, and was complicated by a nerve disorder, myasthenia gravis, which required further surgery and steroid treatment. She also had a kidney transplant in 1990 (Whitemore 5).

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