

Chapter One

EARLY POARCH CREEK HERITAGE

The heritage of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians began thousands of years ago, with the first of the Creek ancestors, the Muskogee Tribe (that is *Mvskoke* in traditional spelling). Long before the Europeans came to America, the Muskogee were among the most powerful and influential Indian Tribes on the North America Continent.

Here's a timeless tale handed down through the ages of how the Muskogee people first came to be: (Source: "Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors" John R. Swanton, 1922).

"In the beginning, the Muskogee people were born out of the earth itself. They crawled up out of the ground through a hole like ants. In those days, they lived in a far western land beside tan mountains that reached the sky. They called the mountains the backbone of the earth. Then a thick fog descended upon the earth, sent by the Master of Breath. The Indian name for the Master of Breath was "Esakitaummesee."

The Muskogee people could not see. They wandered around blindly, calling out to one another in fear. They drifted apart and became lost. The whole people were separated into small groups, and these groups stayed close to one another in fear of being entirely alone. Finally, the Master had mercy on them. From the eastern edge of the world, where the sun rises, he began to blow away the fog. He blew and blew until the fog was completely gone.

The people were joyful and sang a hymn of thanksgiving to the Master of Breath. And in each of the groups, the people turned to one another and swore eternal brotherhood. They said that from then on these groups would be like large families. The members of each group would be as close to each other as brother and sister, father and son. The group that was farthest east and first to see the sun, praised the wind that had blown the fog away.

They called themselves the Wind Family, or Wind Clan. As the fog moved away from the other groups, they, too, gave themselves names. Each group chose the name of the first animal it saw. So that's how the other clans became known as the Bear, Deer, Alligator, Raccoon, and Bird Clans. However, the Wind Clan was always considered the first clan and the aristocracy of all the clans. The Master-of-Breath spoke to them: 'You are the

beginning of each one of your families and clans. Live up to your name. Never eat of your own clan, for it is your brother.

You must never marry into your own clan. This will destroy your clan if you do. When an Indian brave marries, he must always move with his wife to her clan. There he must live and raise his family. The children will become members of their mother's clan. Follow these ways and the Muskogean will always be a powerful force. When you forget, your clans will die as people'."

A CHANGE OF SCENERY

The Muskogee first settled in North America in northwestern Mexico. They lived there for hundreds of years before encountering the Spaniards under Hernando Cortez in early 16th Century. After several devastating battles with the Spanish forces, the Muskogee decided to leave Mexico. They had lost many of their warriors in these conflicts, and consequently were unwilling to live in a country of foreign conquerors. Soon they would be off to seek a new home.

Another Muskogee tale says in deciding in what direction to go, the people first climbed a high mountain so they could see both to the west and to the east. From here they decided to move in the direction of the sun.

The Muskogee took up a line-of-march eastward and northward. They traveled as far north as the present day state of Ohio. The realization that the northern climate was much colder than they had been accustomed to forced the Muskogee to turn southward. Finally, they settled along waterways in what is present day Alabama and Georgia around the middle of the 16th century.

The Muskogee people found their new homeland along the rivers and creeks one rich in soil that gave them an abundance of crops. The waterways were cool and good to drink, easily navigational and remote from their enemies. Here they made permanent homes, and through the years, the Muskogee enjoyed good health, increasing population and a marked degree of prosperity.

After the Muskogee became known as "Creek," they continued the practice of adopting conquered tribes and accepting bands fleeing from English, French, and Spanish attacks. It was by these methods that the Alabama, Coushatta, Hitchitee, Tuskegee, and Natchez Indian tribes became a part of the expanding Creek Nation.

The name "Creek" came from the early European explorers, mostly English and Scottish, who thread their way into the southeastern United States in the mid-1700s. They designated the Muskogee Indians as "Creek," primarily because of their geographic location along picturesque waterways. The name "Creek" stuck.

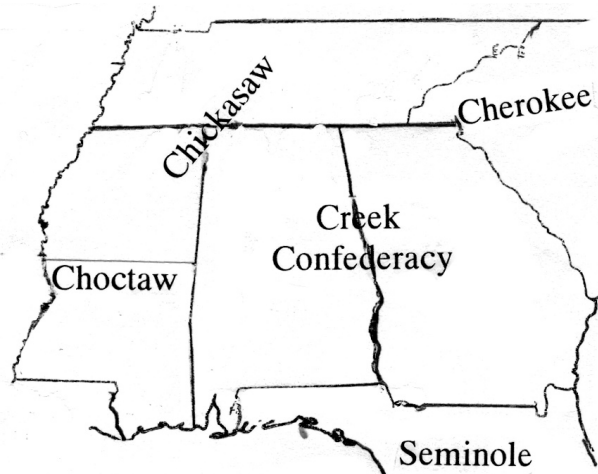
THE CREEK CONFEDERACY

After the Muskogee had gained a firm foothold in their new homeland, they began a series of conquests of neighboring tribes. The Muskogee were noted as fierce fighters, yet generous to those whom they conquered. They adopted the policy of incorporating the conquered tribes into their circle. This allowed for the acceptance of such tribes as the Natchez, Savannahs, Chickasaws, Alabamas, Abihkas, Coosas and Apalachicolas, after losing to the Muskogee in battle.

By the time the Muskogee had become known as the Creek, they constituted a powerful nation. The Creek reputation for strength and a warlike spirit also induced other tribes who had become weak, to seek asylum among them. Many were known to come from other regions around the present-day Southeast to seek the protection of the Creek.

European traders were also welcomed by the Creek, particularly the English and Scottish. These additions to the Creek Nation were a common display by the Creek of confidence within a framework of rituals for acceptance. It was in this manner that the Creek Nation grew and spread across the region, leading over time to a single confederacy.

This formation of an alliance of separate and independent tribes became known as the Creek Confederacy that reached its pinnacle in the 18th Century. While the Poarch area was outside of the main areas of settlement of the Creek Nation – in the southernmost part -- it was within, and a part of, the Creek Confederacy.



Map of Creek Confederacy and the other four “Civilized” Tribes located in the Southeastern United States during the latter part of the 18th Century

UPPER AND LOWER TOWNS

Geographically, the Poarch Ancestral Creek were separated into two groups: settlements along the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Alabama Rivers became known as the “*Upper Towns*” or the Upper Creek Nation. The ancestors of the majority of the Creek families who settled in the Poarch area were from the Upper Towns. Communities along the Flint, Chattahoochee, and Ocmulgee Rivers were called the “*Lower Towns*” or the Lower Creek Nation, and were located primarily in what is now the state of Georgia.

There were Creek towns in Alabama that were included in both groups. The town of Cusseta in East Alabama was primary a lower town. Coosa, Tookabatcha (Tuckabatchee), Talise (Tulsa), Ofuskie (Oakfuskee), Attoussee, Eufaula, Wetumpka, Tuskegee, and Alibamo were the main upper Creek towns. There were numerous other less organized towns in the Alabama portion of the Creek Confederacy.

There was within each town a strong sense of community. Yet, outside of these individual towns, this sense of alliance was de-emphasized. Certain villages and clans were connected more intimately, but most towns retained their autonomy within the extensive Creek Confederation. They were wise enough to unite against a common enemy when necessary, to support the statute and interest of the general Creek Confederacy.

The towns and villages of the Creek Confederacy did a highly effective job of developing a workable civilization. Many historians considered it the most sophisticated culture north of Mexico at the time. Each town had a separate local government. They had fixed rules of governing and a criminal code. They had rules covering marriage and divorce. They lived in houses. The town had public buildings and recreational facilities.

In totality, the Creeks enjoyed from their inception, customs, traditions and life ways that depended on “*community and the cooperation of all.*” The Creeks worked hard together to provide for the basic needs of everyone in the their town or village. The next three chapters will capture the flavor of the early Creek culture.