

## Chapter Six

# ROLE OF THE METIS (Mixed-Bloods)

The Poarch Band of Creek Indians primarily was drawn initially from a variety of mixed-blood (*metis*) families from the Alabama-Tensaw River area (became known as the Tensaw/Little River Communities) in Southwest Alabama. These communities stretched from about the Monroe County line on the north, southward to near the town of Stockton in what is present day Baldwin County.

The river inhabitants for the most part had earlier migrated from the Upper Creek towns and clans located on or close to the Federal Road, and along the Tallapoosa and Coosa Rivers in Central Alabama. This migration of the mixed-blood Poarch Ancestors primarily occurred in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As the number of intermarriages increased, it led to relatively acculturated *metis* being widely acquainted with, and influenced by, white culture in most of their life ways. The Creek wives of the foreigners acted as interpreters and taught their European husbands the language and customs of their people. Conversely, the Creek women and their offspring derived great benefit from their white husbands and fathers. Many learned to read and write, and became adept at the art of trading. They were able to gain a broader and deeper understanding of both the Indian and white cultures, leading to many of the *metis* children becoming tribal leaders as adults.

It was not long after settling in the river area, that these new *metis* property owners begin to have less and less to do with their Upper Creek brethren. Despite this autonomy, they were still sanctioned by the Creek Confederacy. Because they were not harmonious with their kinfolks in the Upper Creek towns, they sought, and eventually were granted, a “*leave to settle*” by the Upper Creek Convention on Indian land in the Tensaw/ Little River areas.

Many of the *metis* who settled in the river communities were able to acquire sizable land holdings and become a part of a thriving economy. Located close to Mobile and the Spanish settlement at Pensacola, the river settlements became a place where several cultures converged. Through this cultural synthesis with the French, Spanish, English and other Indians, the Tensaw Creeks developed an enterprising trade that focused on agriculture, logging and cattle-raising. “*There was a large colony of wealthy and intelligent persons of mixed-blood who had plantations on Little River where they would feed their great droves of cattle...*” is the way Dr. Marion E. Tarvin explained the river communities. There were about 60 Indian families in these communities.

U.S. Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins, writing of the *metis* remarked that they had “*lost their language [i.e., English] speak Creek, and have adopted the customs and manners of the Creeks*” (Grant 1980). Hawkins further reported that they practiced polygamy and that the Creek custom of matrilineal inheritance held among them. Thus when Alexander McGillivray’s half-blood nephew, testified in 1854 that a husband had no control of his wife’s property and that it was inherited by an uncle, nephew or other maternal relative (Chancery Court of Mobile 1851).

At Lake Tensaw (Boatyard Lake), just east of the Alabama River and the Cut Off at Nannahubba Island, “*the first American school,*” in what was to become the state of Alabama, was opened around 1799. William and John Pierce (Fort Pierce was named for the brothers) were the educators. Colonel Pickett had this to say about the school: “*There the high-blood descendants of Lachlan McGillivray--the Taits, Weatherfords, and Durants--... the wealthy Mims, and the children of many others first learned to read. The pupils were strangely mixed in blood, and their color was of every hue.*” The Pierce brothers also built the first cotton gin in the area in 1802.

Because of their educational acumen, economic prowess and working relations with the white man, many of the *metis* from the river communities were increasingly influential within the Creek Nation during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prominent among those who have been documented as settlers in the Tensaw District during this period of time were Alexander McGillivray, Billy Weatherford, David Tate, and Sam Manac (Moniac) (our fifth generation grandfather). We will chronicle the lives of these men in the next three chapters.

Other notable property owners living in close proximity in Baldwin County well into the 1830’s included: George Stiggins, J.D. Driesbach, William Hollinger, Ben Durant, Arthur Sizemore, David Tate Moniac, Margaret Tate, and numerous Tarvins, Steadhams and Earles’.

## **METIS AND THE CREEK WAR**

The thing that changed the lives of most of the *metis* living in the river communities was the Creek Indian War of 1812-14. A definite split had begun within the Creek Nation around 1810. A segment of the Creek believed that the white settlers who were flooding into Creek Country not only wanted their choicest lands, they in fact wanted to drive the Indians out completely. They saw the white’s presence as a threat to their way of life, if not life itself. Strong sentiment was developing to fight back against the whites.

There was a sizable contingent of Creek, mainly *metis* in the river communities, who felt the best route was continued assimilation with the whites. Dr. Marion Elisha Tarvin, explains it this way: “*The*

*wealthier Creeks, who were, of course, a minority, having accumulated property, which is the greatest of all conservative forces in society, were strongly opposed to the war. They saw nothing to gain, and every thing to lose by engaging in a conflict. These became known as the 'White Creek' or 'Friendly Creek.'*

Unfortunately, most of the “Friendly Creek” lost property, livestock and slaves as a result of their allegiances to the whites. The warring Creek or “Red Sticks” as they were called, targeted the lives and properties of the “White Creek,” as well as the white settlers when they went to battle. We will document the tragic Creek Indian War in greater detail in Chapters Ten through Thirteen.

The lives of the majority of the *metis* and their families were never the same after the war. Some did recover and recoup a portion of their former wealth, but most never got over the destruction to their property and the bodily harm done to them personally. Many of those who suffered losses were cited on numerous Federal documents concerning indemnification for their losses and received land grants for their allegiances to the U.S. Government. The list of those receiving land grants included many who settled in the Poarch area.

## **MOVEMENT INLAND**

Several mixed-blood families moved inland from the river communities about fifteen to twenty miles to settle in Monroe County and what was to become Escambia County. Escambia was carved out of Baldwin, Monroe and Conecuh Counties in 1868.

The McGhee, Rolin, Moniac, Colbert, and Gibson families who settled inland in present day Escambia County had a direct hand in the settlement around Poarch. While all did not come to the Poarch area from the Tensaw/Little River communities, many did. In later chapters, we will take a closer look at the families who were the original settlers in the Poarch area.

Some of the river transplants who settled in Monroe County included William Hollinger, and Charles and John Weatherford. Monroe County was also home to several Indian-related families who migrated from other places, including Charles Ehlert (Elliott), and families with the names of: Hathcock, Williams, Dees, Presley, and Taylor. Most of these came from other states.

It is generally felt that those Indian families who migrated from the river communities found the inland area less populous. Here they found land available to exercise their land reservations, which was not the case along the rivers in Baldwin County.