

THE TRAIL OF TEARS TO THE TRAIL OF TRIUMPH

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12-9-93

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Dear Friends:

I want you to meet one of our truly great leaders of Oklahoma. I could (rightfully) introduce her to you as a daughter of one of our oldest founding families and as the leader of a sovereign nation or as the Principal Chief of The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. She is Wilma Pearl Mankiller and she is as strong and courageous as her (anglicized) family name may imply!

She was one of eleven children born to her Cherokee father and Dutch-Irish mother in 1945. During her lifetime she has faced a number of battles and personal tragedies, including childhood poverty, a near fatal automobile accident, a rare neuromuscular disease and a disease requiring renal transplantation surgery. She describes herself today as disgustingly healthy!

Wilma's ancestors were forced to leave their homelands in the Southeast U.S. and move to Oklahoma Indian Territory in 1838 - the infamous "Trail of Tears". Here they faced drought and disease and internal strife which divided and weakened the tribe over the next two generations. Original land allocations were arbitrarily changed or abrogated as were other treaties and rights; continuing until statehood in 1907 and even thereafter.

For the Mankiller family this (trail of tears) continued, when in 1957, as part of the Indian Urbanization Program the family was relocated to San Francisco. Wilma finished highschool, started her college degree program in sociology and became involved in the American Native Rights Movement, as she continued her education at night school. In 1976 she returned to her native Oklahoma, earned her degree in social work and began her career working in community development for the Cherokee tribe. For the next ten years she worked under Chief John Ross Swimmer and when he was appointed to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1985, Mankiller was elected as the first female Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

Today, Chief Mankiller continues to fight the battles of her ancestors; not on the battlefield but against the poverty and prejudices of modern society, but today the role of Chief is much more complex. She serves more as a C.E.O. of a large, conglomerate corporation with a roll of over 120,000 members and an annual budget of over \$60 million. She is involved with securing federal, state and private grants to promote new business enterprises, develop expanding health care facilities, road improvements, negotiating property boundaries and rights, etc., etc.

She has been named by Newsweek magazine as one of its American heroes, by Ladies Home Journal as one of the 100 most important women in America, as Woman of the Year by Ms. Magazine and by the Harvard Foundation for her American leadership. She is the recipient of a number of honorary degrees from universities across the nation.