



Summitt childhood home (Photo: April R. Summitt)

Naming Place, Mapping Place

CHEROKEE STORIES *of the* **TENNESSEE RIVER**

BY APRIL R. SUMMITT

I grew up in the mountains of Appalachia and experienced a rare childhood that could easily sound like a story from another century. We lived, as farmers do, by the cycles of the seasons, and our playground was the mist-shrouded forests and mountain-sides of the Cumberland Plateau. Our house was an old log cabin, heated by wood-burning stoves.

Trickling down the sides of the bluffs were mountain streams with fluctuating, seasonal flows. I delighted in their waterfalls and rapids, or their gentle trickles and secret pools. But what seemed most exciting were the excursions when my father took me and my siblings to watch the rust-colored barges pass the locks and dams along the Tennessee River. This



Lover's Leap (Photo: April R. Summitt)

large river has long been a major transportation system for the region. It was once dangerous and unpredictable with cyclical floods that devastated farmland and town alike. When the Tennessee Valley Authority Dam system was completed in the 1930s, the river became tame and reliable, although drought can still bring its levels dangerously low. The TVA system generates a large percentage of the region's electricity and is still one of the most prestigious employers in the river valley.

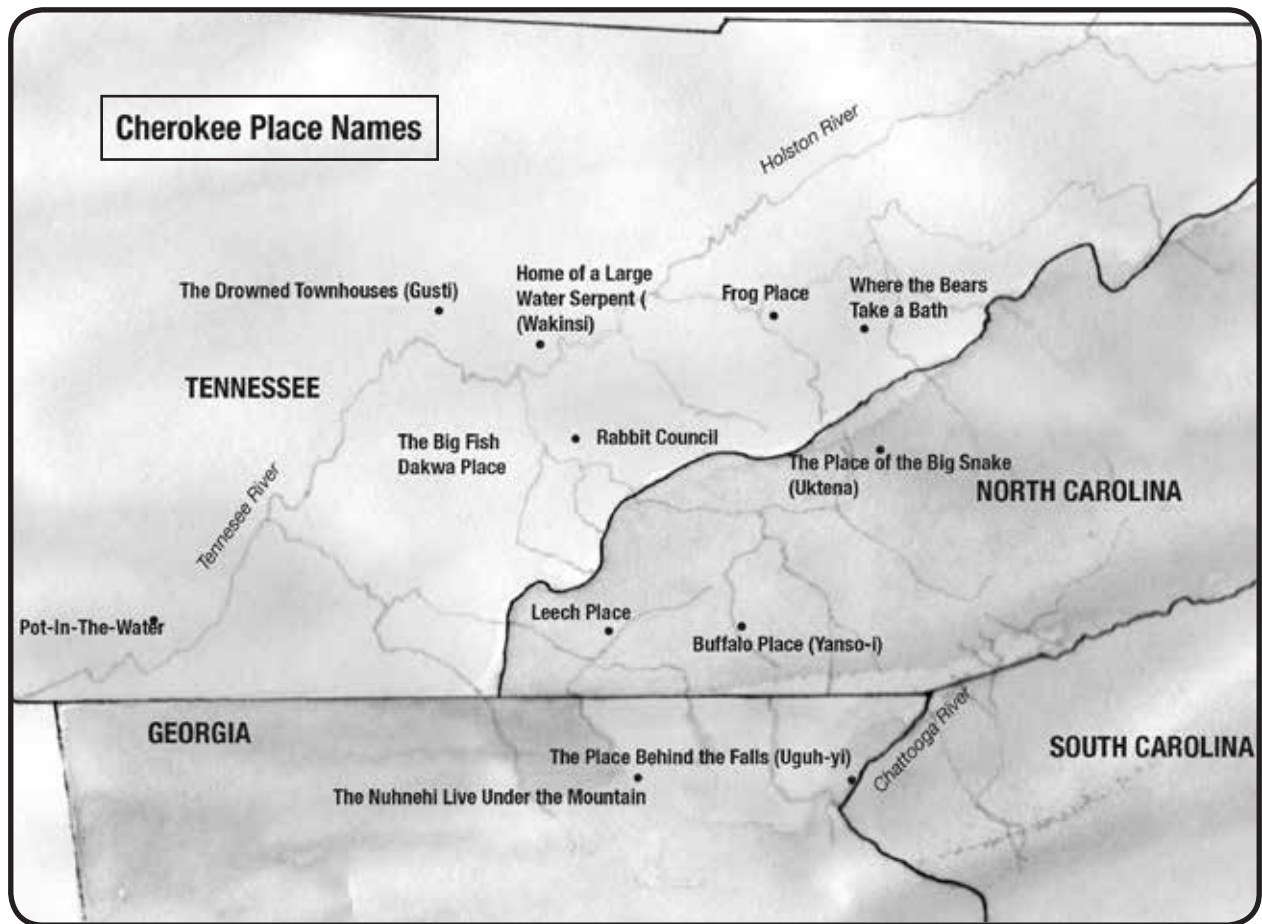
The story of the TVA, however, is only one part of the Tennessee River's history. In order to fully understand its importance, one needs to trace backward past Civil War battles and Scottish colonial settlers, to an even earlier story. Not far from the mountain where I grew up, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation has its home. Studying the river's story means studying the indigenous people who lived along its banks. The road up the mountain to my mother's house is marked as part of the 1838 Trail of Tears, where an estimated 4,000 Cherokees died on their forced march to Oklahoma Indian Territory. I grew up seeing those signs and hearing the stories of forced migration and loss.

As I pursued further study of the Cherokee people before and after the 1838 Removal, I visited the tribal elders

who told me amazing stories. Naturally, there were stories of battles with other native communities, tales of first contact with Europeans, trade, migration, and conquest. But the stories that surprised me were the ones they told about the river, the mountains, the fields and streams. Connected to each Cherokee story was a specific place that had a name. As I listened, their stories painted a mental map of Cherokee space. And through that space ran the Tennessee River as an important figure, an actor in the story as much as any human.

Although the exact meaning of the name "Tanasi" (Tennessee) is unknown, the Cherokee typically called all rivers "The Long Man" or "Long Person." Obviously, anthropomorphizing a river is not new. We sing songs about the Mississippi River as the "Old Man River." What was fascinating to me about the Cherokee stories was that rivers contained divine powers, held the spirits of ancestors, and were the dwelling places of mystical beings. The Long Man had his feet in the valley and his hair in the mountains.¹

Not only did the Cherokee see the river as a powerful being, they also explained various features of the river as the voice of the "long person" (water falls or rapids) or the results of some supernatural occurrence. For example, one particular



place in the river, about eighteen miles below the site of the old Fort Loudon, is a place the Cherokee call Gusti. They believed that an old Cherokee townhouse once washed down the river with all the inhabitants gathered inside for a dance. Any Cherokee paddling past the location believed that the dome-shaped rock visible under the water at that site was the old townhouse now turned to stone. They sometimes heard drumming and dancing, and threw food into the water as they passed the spot.

Another interesting place on the Tennessee River, known as “the Suck,” is located about eight miles below Chattanooga. The Cherokee called these dangerous whirlpools “Pot-in-the-Water” because the swirling water looked like a boiling pot. The story behind this place-name involves a tale of several fishermen caught in the whirlpool. A giant fish swallowed one of the men, but he managed to survive and later told of seeing a house at the bottom of the river where many people lived and called to him to join them.

The Long Man had his feet in the valley and his hair in the mountains.

In this way, Cherokee assigned meaning to geographic features by creating stories that described and explained the natural environment. They also used the stories to explain other phenomena, such as baldness. At a point in the Tennessee River where Toco creek flows into it, there is a place the Cherokee called Dakwai, or “Dakwa Place.” This location was the home of a giant fish called Dakwa who once swallowed a warrior trying to cross this place. The thrashing of this giant fish caused rough waters in this location, which could easily capsize a canoe. The warrior swallowed by Dakwa in the story managed to cut himself out of the fish’s belly with a mollusk shell. Before he managed to escape, however, the juices in the fish’s belly burned off the warrior’s hair, and he was bald ever after.

The “Long Man” was both a conduit between worlds and a source of healing and spiritual power. In the first capacity, the river is the home of various ancestors or other immortal beings. In the previous stories about the “Pot-in-the-Water”



Stream on Walden's Ridge (Photo: April R. Summitt)



Pot-in-the-Water (Photo: April R. Summitt)

and the stone townhouses at “Gusti,” people were living under the water, dancing and calling out for any hapless fishermen to join them. The story speaks of “Nunnehi” or immortals who lived in the waters and were responsible for carrying the townhouse away. The Cherokee believed these people under the water were their ancestors; ones who had died and gone to live with the “Nunnehi.” Waterfalls were often viewed as doorways to the underworld or land of immortals and mysterious creatures.

Another story tells of a large snake or serpent that lived in the river. To see the serpent was an evil omen and the

story tells of a man whose child died shortly after he saw the serpent. One Cherokee storyteller told of people who lived in the water and rode through rivers into the underworld on the backs of rattlesnakes that were as big as horses. That both good and evil could live in the water emphasizes its nature as connector between upper worlds of good and light, and the lower world of darkness and evil. It also reveals the importance of water as a source of power that supported magical beings of both sorts.

In fact, any real power wielded by Cherokee medicine men ultimately derived from the water. Ethnographers

describe the process of “Going to Water” as part of most Cherokee ceremonies and rituals. In the yearly Green Corn ceremony, the Cherokee gave thanks for sustenance and celebrated the harvest. Part of the ceremony is a “solemn procession, to purify themselves in running water.” A modern-day Cherokee storyteller Freeman Owle states that in the old days, Cherokee people “went to water” every morning to purify themselves of “any thoughts or feelings” that might separate the person from his or her human and animal family. They believed that running water, or the “Long Person,” would bring them health, if asked properly. Although everyone bathed in the water as a daily ritual, special healing and prayers for long life or healthy childbirth were conducted by medicine men who used the water as a conduit of spiritual power.

What all of these stories do is create a map the Cherokee used to understand the world and their place in it. When the Cherokee were removed from the banks of the Tennessee River, it was more than a political and emotional loss, it was also a cosmological disaster. The places where once ancestors and animals interacted were gone. The gateways between mystical worlds were closed, and the river that seemed to matter for everything was left behind. What did it now mean to be a Cherokee?

Similar ethnohistories have been written about the Apache tribe in the southwest. In his book, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso describes how tribal elders taught their children.² Similar to some stories I heard from Cherokee elders, Apache elders could communicate values to their children. By simply pointing to a hill or bend in the river, a father could say, “remember Snake Mountain” and the child would know the story of that place and a specific lesson connected to it. When such places are lost to strip mining or buried beneath a dam’s reservoir, vital parts of a people’s worldview and identity is also lost.

Yet there are positive stories to tell. The restoration of a wetland in the Delta of the Colorado River brings back to life parts of the cultural map of the Cucupa people. Replanting a mountain forest near the Tennessee River protects its riparian ecosystem from further decline, preserving part of the Cherokee story. I have spent most of the past three decades teaching many different types of history: mostly western, largely American, but interspersed with courses on world civilizations, globalization, and the history of engineering. In all of my courses, I talk about

the environment and the role it plays in the human story. Through this new lens, students learn to view rivers or mountains as active players in history. And as they do, their discussions and assignments begin to reveal their own connections to place, whether urban or rural. As my students learn to recognize, all of our stories have been influenced by the natural world we inhabit. The story of a river is the story of us. And knowing the story of our relationship with the environment may be the best hope for both its future and ours.

Further Readings

Mooney, James. *Myths of the Cherokee*. New York: Dover Publications, 1995.

Purdue, Theda and Michael Green. *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2007.

Smithers, Gregory D. *The Cherokee Diaspora: An Indigenous History of Migration, Resettlement, and Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Waselkov, Gregory A., Peter H. Wood, and M. Thomas Hatley. *Powhatan’s Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

End Notes

1. It is interesting to note that the earliest records of Cherokee stories of place or origins were recorded by male anthropologists. In most of those, the river is anthropomorphized as male. In the interviews I recorded with tribal elders, the river is almost always referenced as non-gendered—the “Long Person.”

2. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).



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