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PRODUCT OF CHAOS: W. W. KEELER, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION, IDENTITY AND CHEROKEE REVITALIZATION, 1961-1976

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Product of Chaos: W. W. Keeler, Community Organization, Identity and Cherokee Revitalization, 1961-1976

On September 4, 1971, W. W. Keeler, the first elected chief of the Cherokee Nation in 64 years, stood under the hot Oklahoma sun to address his people. "Today," he said, "we see the beginning of the realization of everything that was only a dream during the lifetime of most of us here." He spoke these words from the steps of the capitol building built in 1870, on the day commemorating the signing of the 1839 constitution. These were symbols of the Cherokees' triumphant endurance following their forced removal to Oklahoma—an era brought to an end in 1907 when Indian Territory became a state. Now, on the day of his historic inauguration, Keeler proudly reflected, "The Cherokee nation was never dead; only asleep. Today it stirs and begins to awaken." The election was only one step along this road to renewal. Keeler vowed to create a new tribal constitution to usher the tribe into an era of prosperity that would rival their Golden Age. He would not rest, he promised, until the power in Cherokee country had been restored to its rightful foundation: the people.[1]

The 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the rebirth of the Cherokee Nation under the guidance of Chief Keeler. These decades are best known for militant struggle, with groups like the National Indian Youth Council, the American Indian Movement, and other activist organizations cited as the catalysts for change. In 1961, the NIYC released a statement describing the tumultuous conditions that faced Native Americans across the United States. They declared, "We are the products of the poverty, despair, and discrimination pushed on our people from the outside. We are the products of chaos. Chaos in our tribes. Chaos in our personal lives." Indeed, Indian country was in an

[1] "Chief Keeler Promises New Tribal Constitution," *The Oklahoman*, 5 September 1971, 46.

uproar, and the same was true in the heart of the Cherokee Nation. Few historians, however, see beyond this chaos to the stunning revitalization that occurred during the same period. They tend to focus on the conflicts and the rumors that threatened to tear the legally defunct Nation apart.[2] And yet, the Nation was not destroyed. It obtained renewed legal, financial, and cultural backing as it grappled with defining a modern role for itself that encompassed traditional meanings of identity as well. The conflicts over blood and political ideology are more important as they reveal the unexpected activism of Keeler's tenure as Chief. The oilman and local politician was less conservative than his reputation as a backwater anti-Communist would lead one to believe. Transcending the liberal-conservative divide, Keeler initiated the revitalization of the Cherokee Nation that culminated in popular elections and a new tribal constitution.

With Keeler at the helm, the tribe successfully sued the federal government for a claim of nearly fifteen million dollars and reinvested a portion of those funds into industrial, educational, and cultural programs, helping individual Cherokees defeat the cycle of poverty and restore tribal autonomy. These fifteen years were also some of the Nation's most contentious. The controversy centered largely on Keeler himself. Initially appointed Principal Chief by Harry Truman in 1949, Keeler had built a reputation as an executive of Phillips Petroleum and a government consultant. On paper at least, Keeler's

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[2] National Indian Youth Council Conference policy statement, 1961, American Indian Institute Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 3, Folder 18. Daniel Cobb, "Devils in Disguise: The Carnegie Project, the Cherokee Nation, and the 1960s," *American Indian Quarterly* 32 (Summer 2007): 465-490; Cobb, "'Us Indians Understand the Basics': Oklahoma Indians and the Politics of Community Action, 1964-1970." *Western Historical Quarterly* 33 (Spring 2002); Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Circe Strum, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). In *Native Activism in Cold War America*, Cobb credits the NIYC as one of the key forces of change in Native American politics and society. In contrast, he portrays Keeler and his associate, lawyer Earl Boyd Pierce, as backward-looking bullies who stodgily enforced the static quo.

only responsibility was to the federal government, not the Cherokee people. Nevertheless, his background also indicated a commitment to his tribe. He first became involved in tribal politics in 1948, when the Texas Cherokees elected him to serve on a national committee of unofficial advisors. When then-Chief Milam died in 1949, this committee chose Keeler as his successor, and Truman approved their decision.[3]

Keeler was conservative and supported Americanization. However, he was also progressive and promoted Cherokee distinctiveness. He believed strongly in the goodwill of the United States government and in free-market capitalism, but he also believed that government had a responsibility to the Cherokees, who as citizens deserved a voice in their own affairs. Meanwhile, a small but vocal minority, largely comprised of an older generation of extreme conservatives and a younger group of liberals, attacked Keeler as a self-serving fraud whose primary goal was to advance his own interests. They questioned his heritage and his policies, viewing him as an outsider determined to dismantle the last vestiges of their Cherokee community by submerging them in mainstream white America.

Unlike other tribes in which the lines of conflict were drawn clearly between generations or between full bloods and mixed bloods, the dissent among the Cherokee population remained much more nebulous.[4] Underlying the turmoil in the Cherokee Nation was a fundamental disagreement about what it meant to be Cherokee. Because

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[3] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation: A History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005): 210.

[4] For instance, Keeler's most vocal opponent, George Groundhog, was about thirty with a wife and two school-aged children, and Keeler annoyed many older Cherokees with his use of residual funds. Wesley Proctor was a recent full-blood high school graduate who worked for the OCCO while Don Bread, another full blood, was two years older and a graduate of Northeastern State Teacher's College at Tahlequah, Oklahoma, worked for the Cherokee Nation. Anna Kilpatrick, an educated, Cherokee-speaking full-blood and wife and mother, supported Keeler, while Louella Pritchett, who had a nearly identical demographic background, opposed him. From various interviews, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma.

Keeler saw his Indian identity as an attitude rather than a concrete way of life or degree of blood, he sought to foster a sense of community that would enable his fellow tribal members to function in American economic and political spheres. While his detractors believed that the Cherokee had to remain separate in order to preserve their identity, Keeler and his fellow tribal leaders did not see Americanization and tribalism as mutually exclusive. They were acculturationists, not assimilationists—an important difference. Whereas assimilation presumes the total disappearance of a minority group's distinctiveness, acculturation allows for pluralism. Keeler embraced certain aspects of mainstream America—most specifically, political and economic structures—but he was convinced that, at the same time, the Cherokee could and should retain their cultural and legal separation as a domestic dependant nation. He saw the Cherokee Nation as both part of and apart from the American nation, an autonomous entity within the larger United States.

Before Keeler could lead his tribe into the twentieth century, he had to contend with a complex history of eroding sovereignty. Following removal in the 1830s, the Cherokees reestablished themselves in their new homeland. They boasted a strong national government, a court system, and a network of public schools, all of which earned them a reputation as a modern, prosperous Indian nation. Indian Territory's transition to the state of Oklahoma, however, undermined their successful autonomy. Nineteenth-century allotment policies had already fractured the once-thriving nation, and statehood was a devastating blow. In preparation for the conversion, Congress passed an Act to Provide for the Final Dispensation of the Affairs of the Civilized Tribes in 1906, which finalized citizenship rolls, transferred control of schools to the Secretary of the Interior

and utilities to the state, and disbursed remaining allotments. The Cherokee had a history of resisting land policies, and so Section 6 of the Five Tribes Act sought to guarantee the unimpeded conveyance of allotments. There would always be someone to sign deeds because Section 6 granted the President the power to appoint a chief of his choosing. The Interior Department interpreted the provision as an end to elections and then went a step further to conclude that the Cherokee government as an autonomous entity ceased to exist. Fully committed to a program of assimilation, the executive branch took a purely utilitarian approach to tribal representation. The President appointed a series of "Chiefs for a Day," men who literally had power for twenty-four hours with the sole purpose of signing documents. Between 1907 and 1940 the Cherokee had a chief for a total of one week. Meanwhile, non-Indians encroached on tribal communities until Oklahomans declared that the Cherokees were, politically and culturally, mere relics. "For all practical purposes," summarized historian Robert Conley, "the Cherokee Nation had become dormant."[5]

Conley, however, goes on to explain that the Nation's presumed inactivity was merely superficial. In reality, the Five Tribes Act guaranteed that tribal governments would continue "in full force and effect for all purposes authorized by law." While the Department of the Interior ignored this provision for its own purposes, the Cherokee Nation strove to operate outside federal constraints. On their own initiative, they organized a National Council, from which the Executive Committee originated. The

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[5] Rennard Strickland, *The Indians of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 30-54; Albert Wahrhaftig, "The Tribal Cherokee Population of Eastern Oklahoma: Report of a Demographic Survey of Cherokee Settlements in the Cherokee Nation," 1965, American Indian File, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, OK, Box 3, Folder 12; Susan Work, "The 'Terminated' Five Tribes of Oklahoma: The Effect of Federal Legislation and Administrative Treatment on the Government of the Seminole Nation," *American Indian Law Review* (1978): 81-141; Conley, 207-213.

federal government refused to recognize the National Council as a legitimate governing body. Then, in the 1930s, official policy shifted from a system of forced assimilation to the more pluralist approach of Commissioner John Collier's Indian New Deal. The National Council, attended by 300 Cherokees, elected Jesse Bartley Milam as their Principal Chief in 1941, and, in the New Deal spirit, Franklin Roosevelt sanctioned this appointment by officially installing him—and not for just a day.[6]

Milam's actual powers remained limited. The Cherokees still had no tribal constitution or formal government structure. As part of the Indian New Deal, Collier had initiated the Indian Reorganization Act. Given their unique non-reservations status, Oklahoma Indians were exempted from the IRA. Instead, Congress eventually passed the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act in 1956, which promised rights of self-government through federal charter to any group of ten or more Indians. Milam declined to apply for a charter because he feared "that the United States government could not be expected to act responsibly as a trustee for the Cherokee Nation or its people. The only entity that could do that was a government of the Cherokee people, acting as a 'domestic dependent nation,' as prescribed by the Supreme Court of the United States." The Cherokee Nation already possessed inherent sovereignty and did not need a charter to exercise it. Instead, Milam called a meeting of the National Council to create a more permanent entity, the Executive Committee, composed of representatives from various regions of Cherokee country and intended to act as an intermediary between the BIA and individual tribesmen. The federal government never officially acknowledged this tribal initiative, but neither

[6] Conley, 210; Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).

did it interfere. Thus, Milam helped to expand the position of chief beyond mere signatory, a foundation on which Keeler would later build.[7]

Demographically, the Nation remained an identifiable entity. In the early 1960s, the Carnegie Project sent anthropologist Albert Wahrhaftig to northeastern Oklahoma to study the Cherokee, supposedly "all but bred out." His findings, however, challenged the myth of Cherokee assimilation. Instead, he reported, the boundaries between Cherokees and whites had grown more pronounced. Non-Indians were moving out of northern Oklahoma, leaving behind Cherokee enclaves. More than 9,500 Cherokees lived in over 50 settlements, and 2,000 more lived in enclaves in small towns and cities—and these were conservative estimates, for he excluded anyone he considered tainted by extended contact with white society. Furthermore, Wahrhaftig testified, the Cherokees continued to thrive culturally as well as numerically. He did not identify Cherokees based on roll numbers or blood quantum. Instead, he worked "*in terms of social participation. Such individuals live as Cherokees, in Cherokee settlements, and interact with one another as members of a Cherokee tribal community.*" They spoke Cherokee, married within the tribe, and did not engage with the mainstream white economy Wahrhaftig found almost ten thousand individuals who met these criteria. In other words, the cultural foundations of the Cherokee Nation remained viable.[8]

More importantly, the Cherokees reestablished their financial base. In 1961, the tribe's General Council Earl Boyd Pierce, a Cherokee himself, headed a legal team that

[7] Conley, 207-213; Howard L. Meredith, *Bartley Milam: Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation* (Muskogee, Indian University Press, 1985).

[8] Wahrhaftig, "Tribal Cherokee Population," italics from the original; Albert Wahrhaftig and Robert Thomas, "Renaissance and Repression: The Oklahoma Cherokee," *Transaction* 5 (1969): 42. The assumption of such anthropologists as Wahrhaftig, Robert Thomas, and Circe Strum—as well as historians like Cobb—was that Cherokees fell into two camps: traditionalists and assimilationists. Wahrhaftig did not count as Cherokee anyone he deemed even partially assimilated, drawing a broad—and false—line through the tribe.

used the Indian Claims Commission to sue the United States for unfairly appropriated land. The Cherokees won a substantial settlement for six million acres of land wrongfully opened to homesteaders in 1893. At the time, it was the largest payment in the ICC's fifteen-year history. Pierce and his co-councils argued that the $1.277 per acre that the government originally paid should have been $10 given prevailing land values. The ICC set the fair market value $3.75 per acre, and the Cherokee received the difference: $14.7 million.[9] As future chief Ross Swimmer reflected, "if there's no money there's no power."[10] The settlement enhanced the power of Keeler's appointed government, granting them a purpose and leading to increased infrastructure, which in turn enhanced Keeler's own influence in his role as chief. It also amplified scrutiny and forced the tribal government to connect with their people in order to determine how best to use the funds.

Keeler controlled the settlement money, for the BIA viewed the Principal Chief as essentially a business manager. Like his predecessor Milam, Keeler's power derived from the federal government, which still refused to hold popular elections for a position they saw as temporary. The job of the Principal Chief, according to the Department of the Interior, was to funnel funds to individual Cherokees. Once the funds ran out, said area director Virgil Harrington, "we should move on" and the Cherokees should join the American mainstream. Because Keeler was a cultural pluralist, however, he invested rather than merely distributed the money. After an initial per capita disbursement, Keeler chose to provide for the tribe's future.[11]

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[9] "Cherokees Win Claims Award of $14 Million," *The Oklahoman*, 8 April 1961, 31.

[10] Ross Swimmer, "Conversations," in *American Indian Constitutional Reform and the Rebuilding of Native Nations*, ed. Eric D. Lemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 102-103.

[11] Minutes from the first meeting of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity at the University of Oklahoma, 14 June 1965, Fred Harris Papers, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 282, Folder 19, 3; "Message from the Chief: Chief Challenges Cherokees to 'Get Involved' for Improvement," *Cherokee Nation News*, 13 January 1969, 1.

By 1970, the tribal government increased its activity substantially as they created programs to deploy residual funds. They built new tribal offices on land won in a second federal lawsuit. There were tourist attractions including a tribally owned restaurant and hotel, as well as a cultural center, archives, living history village, and an amphitheater that housed a dramatic reenactment of the Trail of Tears. They opened eleven arts and crafts centers, which provided both employment opportunities and a means of preserving traditional culture. As part of the War on Poverty, they took advantage of housing, education, loan, and youth employment programs. In order to do so, Keeler sent Pierce to the BIA, where the General Council argued that "an Indian Tribe has sovereign power over a reservation, which is in substance a State," asserting that government organizations like the Public Housing Administration could work with the Cherokee Nation in the same way they did business with the state of Oklahoma.[12] Additionally, Keeler used his influence in the business world to attract numerous industries to the area, including textile, pipeline, plastics, and boat manufacturing plants. They created Cherokee Nation Construction to ensure that individual Cherokees benefitted from the jobs crated by the building boom. They printed their own weekly newspaper, and each community elected several representatives who served on an advisory committee. These economic and social reforms bolstered the National government, which translated their increased power into further reform. Thus, in 1971, the tribe held its first elections since 1907, and Keeler began the process of drafting a new constitution. Once again, the Cherokee Nation could boast of its courts, schools, and administration.

[12] "Summary Report of the Meeting of the Inter-Tribal council of the Five Civilized Tribes held on July 8, 1964 at Lake Texoma Lodge, Kingston, Oklahoma," 8 July 1964, American Indian File, Box 3, Folder 7.

Despite these achievements—or, perhaps, because of them—Keeler faced intense criticism. The most common censure focused on the fact that he was federally appointed, not elected by the community. Some accused him of using "the Indians as a public relations lacquer for Phillips." Luke Carey, a full-blood Cherokee in his fifties at the time, believed that the federal government had "hired" Keeler. Hence, he questioned the Chief's dedication. "I know of very few things that he ahs [sic] done for the people," he charged, "and I believe that he has more problems in mind for this big company that he has instead of the Cherokee Nation that he is supposed to be looking out for." Such critics, both young and old and from all degrees of blood, saw Keeler as the embodiment of bureaucracy, an intransigent force that had no understanding of their needs. In an article for the liberal magazine *Ramparts*, non-Indian Peter Collier warned, "Keeler's government is just another foe to be wary of," maligning what he called the "Keeler Complex." The Chief promoted economic development not because he wanted to employ Cherokees and empower future generations but to enhance his own wealth. Supposedly Cherokee owned and operated businesses like the restaurant did not employ actual Cherokees, many accused. The Cherokee National Historical Society's director, Martin Hagerstrand, had no ties to the Cherokee community. People were so desperate that they were willing to "crawl on their bellies" for even the most odious employment, but Keeler and the rest of the government, they believed, remained unmoved. Full-blood George Groundhog, one of his most vocal and angry critics, sneered, "Helping them? Yes, they're helping them—helping them right out of everything they own."[13] This apparent

[13] Luke Carey, interviewed by Faye Delph, 1 July 1969, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-478, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma; Peter Collier, "The Theft of a Nation: Apologies to the Cherokees," 1970, American Indian File, Box 3, Folder 12, 40; George

dismissal of Cherokee needs confirmed that Keeler was a power-hungry outsider, the instrument of a white bureaucratic power structure.

Keeler did not employ activist strategies, either violent or peaceful. He chose a bureaucratic approach, working within the established system. The established system, however, was the source of most objections. For decades, the federal government had thwarted tribal self-determination, imposing its rule on Cherokees through bureaucratic infrastructure. Regardless of his intentions, Keeler was federally appointed and therefore a symbol of frustrated autonomy. Here, the conflict took on an aspect of generational tension that often characterized internal tribal disputes, although the divisions remained murky. The post-Reconstruction generation, many of whom had participated in allotment resistance at the turn of the century, clung to cultural traditions as the fundamental means of revitalization. Their children, however, came of age in an Oklahoma characterized by Jim Crow conservatism and had learned to fear their differences. A man like Keeler exemplified success. He wore a business suit and had the status and material comforts of the white society that tried to shun Indians. Thus, economic and educational development seemed appropriate. Complicating the situation was a third generation trying to navigate the modern world and preserve their identity. Keeler, as the visible symbol of power in Cherokee country, served as the focal point of these identity conflicts.

Detractors also questioned Keeler's official positions outside the tribe. In the 1950s, he served on the Petroleum Administration for Defense, the Military Petroleum

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Groundhog, interviewed by Faye Delph, 15 March 1969, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-409-2; "Social Group on Warpath," *Cherokee Nation News*, 3 August 1969, 2.

Advisory Board, and a delegation to Russia.[14] He also sat on the board of directors of ARROW, Inc., a fundraising branch of the National Congress of American Indians.[15] Starting in 1961, he worked as a consultant for a BIA taskforce discussing ways to reduce the agency's presence. He again assisted the BIA later in the decade, investigating claims with the Yakima in Alaska. His connections in Washington were strong enough that he presented the "Declaration of Indian Purpose," produced by the American Indian Chicago conference, to President Kennedy. He held other miscellaneous positions as well, such as head of the Texas Manufacturers Association and Chairman of the Texas Band of Cherokee Indians. And then, of course, there was his most well-known affiliation with Phillips Petroleum, of which he ultimately became the CEO. Many Cherokees saw Keeler's diverse involvement as an opportunity for him to promote his own agenda. For instance, they wrote off his involvement in Alaska as an attempt to work out a land settlement favorable to oil companies like Phillips at the expense of the Natives.[16]

From another perspective, these associations made Keeler an ideal candidate for Chief. "From Washington to Tokyo to Tahlequah," editorialized one reporter, "Keeler has a reputation of being a man who listens and gets things done." Keeler knew how to play the game of politics, and although he felt genuine concern about his dual roles as Cherokee leader and federal advisor, the connections he forged undoubtedly proved useful to Cherokee interests. Because the tribe was not organized under the OIWA, they

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[14] Phillips' Keeler Sees Change in Foreign Relations: President and Chief Executive Credits Recent Oil Successes Abroad to Firm's Willingness to Take in as Partners Government Oil Companies Where Phillips Operates," *Cherokee Nation News*, 2 April 1968, 1.

[15] *The Field Foundation Inc: A Review of its Activities for the Two Years Ended September 30, 1957* (Chicago: The Field Foundation, 1957). Ironically, the Field Foundation helped to finance ARROW, Inc. Keeler and Earl Boyd Pierce would later attack the Field Foundation for inciting political unrest in the Cherokee Nation by funding the Original Cherokee Community Organization, which sued the Chief and the BIA.

[16] Groundhog interview; "Principal Chief Named Head of Manufacturer's Association," *Cherokee Nation News*, 9 December 1969, 1.

lacked a clearly identifiable power structure, which left the initiative to whoever held the position of Chief. He could have simply carried out federal directives, but Keeler chose to take advantage of the Cherokee's indeterminate status and was a proactive leader who utilized his myriad resources. For example, he turned to his friends in Washington to promote the election bill. Additionally, he capitalized on his relationship with Phillips in order to fund the *Cherokee Nation News*, and he enlisted the company's public relations department to develop the Cherokee Cultural Center's advertisement campaign. As one young Cherokee observed, "If you got the influence, you can get anything done," and therefore the Chief represented an asset for the tribe.[17] Keeler was his own master; neither the BIA nor Phillips Petroleum nor any other organization pulled his strings.

Nevertheless, Keeler's identity as a Cherokee frequently came under attack. Wesley Proctor, a young Cherokee, admitted that Keeler may have believed he was acting in the tribe's best interest, "but his techniques and tactics had never worked, never will" because "he just doesn't know a Cherokee. He's a white man." His critics believed that he was "isolated by birth and background from the Indians he insists on governing." His fraction of Cherokee blood was not sufficient to qualify him as a spokesman for the tribe. He spoke no Cherokee, lived among whites, and barely met membership requirements. Rather unfairly, they saw him as an extension of the white power structure, an outsider imposed on their community.[18]

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[17] "Tribal Chief is Phillips Man of Action," *Cherokee Nation News*, 22 October 1968, 7; Ed Edmondson to W. W. Keeler, 2 April 1953, Earl Boyd Pierce Papers, Cherokee National Archives, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, Box 2, Folder 8; Don Bread, interviewed by Faye Delph, 23 July 1969, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-486.

[18] Wesley Proctor, interviewed by Faye Delph, 19 November 1968, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-384; Collier, 42; Groundhog interview.

These criticisms were predicated on a desire for Cherokee isolation. In order to preserve their tribal identity, this group of critics believed that they needed to insulate themselves from white America, which Keeler seemed to embody. Proctor, one of the founding members of the OCCO, put their perspective most clearly when he said, "An Indian is an Indian. A white man's a white man. That's all there is to it." Similar to Wahrhaftig's criteria, a "real Cherokee" was full-blood—half at the very least. He spoke Cherokee, and his interactions with whites remained infrequent. Mixed-bloods were too assimilated, and as a result "would allow so much of their Cherokee money to go to non-Indian scoundrels."[19] From their point of view, 'Cherokee' was a concept that did not allow significant change. "In ways of living it's different" being Cherokee. Hence, they feared that Keeler's economic initiatives were simply another means of undermining their culture by forcing assimilation and thereby eroding their autonomy.[20] With his mixed background, college education, and prominent position in the mainstream business world, Keeler posed a threat to their relatively static view of identity.

The Chief, in contrast, had a more dynamic view of his Cherokee identity. To him, it was an attitude rather than a concrete way of living. One did not stop being Indian by moving away from the reservation or by voting in a congressional election. Change did not automatically entail cultural decimation. Keeler believed that the Cherokees needed to approach modernization like a willow: "Let's bend with it, but don't break." In other words, he thought it was possible to extract the positive aspects of white society and employ them within a Cherokee framework. Specifically, he identified the Cherokee attitude toward education, their surroundings, time, and other individuals as their defining

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[19] Proctor interview; Mildred Ballenger to W. W. Keeler, 22 December 1965, Pierce Papers, Box 18, Folder 116.

[20] Proctor interview; Strum, *Blood Politics*.

characteristics. Rather than rigidly disciplining youth, his people allowed children enough independence to develop a sense of personal accountability. Additionally, they not only promoted conservation but also approached their environment with greater attention to detail. Rather simplistically, he stated, "I can smell snakes yet, and I think that's a carry-over of something that Cherokees used to use their nose more than white people do." Keeler also appreciated what he stereotypically saw as the Cherokee's non-linear, unrushed approach to time. Finally, the Cherokees demonstrated more "respect for the other fella," recognizing that "there is a world that we can all live in." This concept of respect was absolutely essential to Keeler, for it fueled his belief in plural identities.[21] Many of these characteristics may seem superficial and cliché, but measuring authenticity is impossible.[22] In his own manner, Keeler was as essentialist as his rivals. The key is that to W. W. Keeler, identity was not bound by blood or concrete "ways of living" like settlement patterns or religion. Rather, it originated from one's perspective. A Cherokee "didn't always think two plus two plus two equals six. He had more of the intuitive kind of approach," explained the Chief. A mindset could survive contact with white society in ways that more static constructions of identity could not, which marked Keeler's pluralism.[23]

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[21] W. W. Keeler, interviewed by Guy Campbell, 17 July 1968, Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

[22] In *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, Paige Raibmon critiques the binary construction of authenticity. The conventional view, which Raibmon associates with colonialism, sets traditional in opposition to modern, uncivilized to civilized, and Indian to White. Accordingly, indigenous people either lost their Indianness by adapting to modern life or were bound to disappear by hanging on to their authenticity. These dichotomies relegate authentic indigenous identity to the past, supporting the myth of the Vanishing Indian and aiding in their dispossession. Raibmon, however, argues that indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest during the late nineteenth century defied either-or categorization. Rather, they manipulated the colonial discourse to take advantage of economic, political, and cultural opportunities offered by "playing Indian," and she renders the term "authenticity" essentially meaningless (11).

[23] Keeler interview.

When he predicted that in twenty-five years, "it'll be pretty hard to say, other than the culture, who's white and who's not," Keeler firmly believed in the desirability of such change. Whereas his critics feared any acculturation ultimately led to total assimilation, Keeler unabashedly embraced American ways of living, but he did not see this as a threat to Cherokee identity. Because he believed that culture was an attitude instead of a set of practices, he saw no reason why integration into the American economy or political system should have cultural ramifications. His pro-acculturationist standpoint did not translate into a desire for the Cherokee to disappear. In fact, he agreed with Earl Boyd Pierce that the Cherokee were a "people unlike any other segment of the population of the earth" and that their distinctive characteristics enriched the United States as a whole. In his own life, he found that his heritage "hasn't hindered, it really helped."[24]

In addition to his cultural perspective, Keeler's conservative political philosophy defined his approach to rebuilding the Cherokee Nation. From his position in the business world, he considered the tribe's greatest problem to be an underdeveloped economy. Steep jobless rates and inadequate training combined with a lack of opportunity for individual initiative to cripple tribal communities. He presented his principles in an address to the Texas Manufacturers Association in Fort Worth, Texas in October of 1969. He struggled with the current state of government aid, which he believed overlooked significant "human resources." The welfare system met only the superficial needs of the impoverished, providing food, clothing, and housing in what he referred to as "the handout approach." Time and time again, said Keeler, he saw this system fail. He recalled his experiences with Alaskan Natives. They used to support each other as a community,

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[24] Earl Boyd Pierce, interviewed by Faye Delph, June 1969, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-505; Keeler interview.

sharing childcare responsibilities and supplementing one another's incomes. But then the welfare state interfered, and parents stopped working, and the youth lost respect for their parents and started "filling up on pop which did no more than bring decay to heretofore excellent teeth." "The system smothered the aspiration, self-respect, and sense of challenge which had been characteristic of these people," claimed Keeler. It created dependents when it ought to have fostered productivity.[25]

Transforming the underprivileged citizen into "a positive contributor to our society" did not suggest an inert or removed government. Indeed, Keeler considered the handout approach to be shamefully passive. Welfare programs needed to extend beyond mere encouragement to take on a dynamic role. The present system of federally administered relief killed motivation because of its paternalism, Keeler's primary criticism of agencies like the BIA. Instead, the government must make an effort to actively engage impoverished communities. An effective program would be based on motivation, personal dignity and pride, work ethic, family relationships, local communities, and, above all, individual participation. "No one sitting up in an ivory tower in Washington can plan people's lives. The people involved must plan their own lives—with the help, of course, of local experts," he said. He firmly believed in the integrity of "individual human beings. No person wants to feel reduced to the status of a 'do not fold, bend, or mutilate' punchcard [sic]." Rather than distant, fatherly overseers, such programs needed to develop an intensely personal, localized relationship with the

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[25] Keeler interview; W. W. Keeler, "Needed: Prescription for Rehabilitation Welfare" (speech presented at the annual meeting of the Texas Manufacturers Association, Fort Worth, Texas, 31 October 1969), W. W. Keeler Collection, Cherokee National Archives, Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Keeler believed that "America's greatness is not in its material affluence, but in its wealth of concern for the freedom of the individual. This is something that we can be proud of being part of." From "Goals for Personal Greatness," a speech given at Brigham Young University on 20 April, 1973, W. W. Keeler Collection, Box 13, Folder 97.

populations, like the Cherokees, in need of help.[26] Keeler's faith in capitalism and individualism reflected the standard rhetoric of American conservatives during the Cold War. While others like termination leader Dillon Myer used these principles as justification for severing the Indians' unique status as sovereign entities within the federal system, Keeler instead saw them as the basis of that very sovereignty.[27]

Keeler's personal history paralleled his hopes for the Cherokee Nation. In 1967 he may have been CEO of Phillips Petroleum, but when he was born in 1908, he was just another rural, mixed-blood Indian. Realistically, his Indian heritage was something he had to overcome, even if he did not consider it an obstacle. Hard work, education, and, especially, a chance to do things for himself—the same conservative values he promoted as Principal Chief—helped him earn both local and federal attention. Keeler was born on a cattle drive in Texas. He grew up in Bartlesville, a small city in Washington County near Kansas that had a high white population. In high school, he began to make a name for himself by running an evangelical oratory club with several of his friends. They traveled to nearby towns and cities giving speeches, practice for his later years on the political scene. Although he started school speaking a mix of English and Cherokee, he graduated as his class valedictorian and had already spent several summers working for Phillips Petroleum. After high school, he studied chemical engineering at college in Kansas University with help from a loan from Phillips' rival, Sinclair. The Great Depression forced him to drop out before earning his degree, but, as he told the story, his

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[26] Keeler, "Needed: Prescription for Rehabilitation Welfare."

[27] See Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993); James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Kenneth R. Philp uses the Cold War mindset to explain termination in *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933-1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 171, and Cobb makes a similar observation about Keeler's conservative politics in "Devils in Disguise."

determination and work ethic enabled him to succeed despite the setback, and he never underestimated the value of the education he did receive.[28]

His initiative earned him the notice of Frank Phillips himself. As a lower-level chemical engineer, Keeler approached Phillips with a proposal for building a new oil-refining plant using an experimental process. It was a risky project, but Phillips gave Keeler his approval. After a frustrating series of trials and errors, Keeler finally succeeded in getting the plant up and running. This episode demonstrates not only the future Chief's willingness to experiment but also his belief that hard work can overcome all obstacles. As he crafted his life narrative for his interviewer, he emphasized that he succeeded because he received the opportunity to do something instead of simply being handed the end result. Even his struggle with alcoholism became a parable for individual initiative, a hurdle he overcame with the aid of his resolve, his family, and what he considered old-fashioned hard work.

The oil executive's experience in international business further influenced his personal philosophy. Under Keeler's direction, Phillips Petroleum initiated unique programs abroad that shared operations with the countries involved, not just other American firms. For instance, in Egypt, they entered into a 50-50 joint venture with the state oil company. People in underdeveloped countries "want to have a voice in what is going on, and they want to take part," and he applied the same belief in his home community. Above all, Keeler emphasized the importance of being "sensitive to the human element in business." In other words, individual people mattered, and forming personal relationships was integral to industry's success. Part of his attitude was

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[28] W. W. Keeler, interviewed by Ruth Scott and Louise Fent, 17 October 1974, Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

tolerance. He spoke of being able to "develop a real friendship" with Mexican personnel, and he become such good friends with a Japanese acquaintance that he "called him my distant cousin." Although conservative, he was by no means an ideologue. "I think each person has to work in the manner he is best suited," he once told an angry AIM activist, reflecting a worldview that allowed for differences in lifestyle and opinion.[29] His ability to relate to people on an individual level was fueled by his dynamic, pluralist conception of identity, and he brought this attitude with him whether in Mexico City or Tahlequah.

At the same time he promoted his version of a Cherokee identity, Keeler—along with the rest of his administration—supported Americanization. While his critics like George Groundhog, Stuart Trapp, and Wesley Proctor saw mixing with American society as the Cherokees' doom, Keeler and his administration believed that integration offered the necessary resources to not only raise the standard of living but also promote Cherokee culture. The reality was that the world had changed, and the Cherokees faced a choice to either remain in the past or develop. He reflected, "We as a tribe are going to be Indians who live in a complex society where computers, math, English, engineering and other skills are the prime mover. We can hold on to our tribal ways. We can remember Indians with our love of the land; our Chief. Our ways. But we can't go back. It's hundreds of years too late for that." Keeler would not let his people be left behind.[30]

As Daniel Cobb makes clear, Keeler, Pierce, and the rest of the administration ascribed to conservative political ideals. Hence, they emphasized patriotism, small government, and conformity. "We are all Americans," emphasized Pierce. "Nobody in

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[29] "Phillips' Keeler Sees Change in Foreign Relations: President and Chief Executive Credits Recent Oil successes to firm's willingness to take in as partners government Oil Companies where Phillips operates," April 2, 1968; Keeler to Becky Lena, 14 February 1973, Keeler Collection, Box 39, Folder 174.

[30] "Chief Says Tribe Must Advance," *Cherokee Nation News*, 21 October 1969, 3.

his right mind would want to see a division among our people and other citizens." The Cherokees could not isolate themselves in ethnic enclaves. In order to reach their productive potential, Pierce and Keeler believed that Indians needed to be treated like their fellow Americans. They did not want the Cherokees to receive special treatment. There were many Americans who wanted to "[g]et something for nothing. But the Cherokee doesn't feel that way." All that the Cherokees wanted was the opportunity to work, not subsist on government handouts.[31]

And yet, these Cherokee leaders would have made many of their contemporaries uncomfortable. The majority of conservatives in their generation advocated assimilation. Area Director Virgil Harrington made his employer's intentions clear. "Our goals are to assimilate," he baldly stated in 1965 to a gathering of Oklahoma Indian leaders that included Earl Boyd Pierce. Pierce and Keeler may have supported the subsidiary goals of "full participation in American life" and "maximum economic self-sufficiency" from an ideological standpoint, but they could not commit to a program that ended in the disappearance of the Cherokee. "Today," Keeler declared, "we Cherokees are building a new and vigorous nation with the goals of bringing the economic benefits of modern America to our people why perpetuating our cultural heritage." In other words, his ideas allowed for a hybrid identity. His strong aversion to welfare fueled his commitment to integration, but his pluralism separated him from the other conservatives of the day.[32]

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[31] Cobb, *American Indian Activism*, Keeler to Wesley Studie, 5 December 1972, Keeler Collection, Box 39, Folder 271.

[32] Earl Boyd Pierce, interviewed by Crosslin Smith, 6 May 1967, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-216; Keeler, "Indian Legacy: An Enduring Fire" (speech presented the annual meeting of the National Institute of Synthetic Rubber Producers, Inc., San Francisco, California, 18 May 1973, Keeler Collection, Box 13, Folder 97.

As part of their conservative agenda, Keeler and Pierce stressed the importance of cooperating with the Bureau. They might disagree with specific tactics, but they supported the system in general. These men were adept at separating individuals from the whole. "I'm able to distinguish between the wrong done the Cherokee people by an individual who works for the government of the United States and the wrong done by the government of the United States," explained Pierce. In their generation's spirit of Cold War nationalism, he and Keeler believed in the overall integrity of the federal structure. Part of their willingness to work within the established system came from financial expediency. As Pierce wondered, "Why spend money to hire someone else to do the job that the BIA already has experience in?"[33] The BIA was one of several resources available for the Cherokee to take advantage of, just as Keeler encouraged exploiting the War on Poverty's various programs. It was a means to an end, one that he believed would soon be unnecessary. Perhaps most importantly, Keeler, influenced by Pierce's legal advice and his conservative convictions, fully supported federal sovereignty. As the United States government's manifestation in Indian affairs, the BIA therefore demanded his allegiance.

This loyalty was not, however, unquestioning. "I don't disagree with statements that wrongs have been done the Indians and that such should be righted," Keeler replied to a critic who called him an appeaser. "I am an Indian," he said, " and I know the white

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[33] Pierce interview, June 1969; Minutes from the first meeting of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity at the University of Oklahoma, 14 June 1965, Fred Harris Papers; "Summary Report of the Meeting of the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes held on April 8, 1964, at the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma," 8 April 1964, American Indian File; "Summary Report of the Meeting of The Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes held at the Aldridge Hotel, McAlester, Oklahoma on April 14, 1965," 14 April 1965, American Indian File, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 3, Folder 7;"Summary Report of the Meeting of the Inter-Tribal council of the Five Civilized Tribes held on July 8, 1864 at Lake Texoma Lodge, Kingston, Oklahoma," 8 July 1964, American Indian File, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 3, Folder 7.

men do not have all the answers and some of the answers he thinks he knows are wrong." Although the Cherokee council supported the BIA, they did not blindly follow all directions. Keeler admitted that when he first began working with the Bureau, it "just about turned my stomach to talk to those people," and so he served on a committee that recommended reforms. Executive Committee member C. C. Victory expressed his apprehension about Department of the Interior policies designed for reservation Indians, which seemed ill-suited to Oklahoma, and Keeler's patience with the Bureau only went so far. He objected to paternalism, which, as seen in his prescriptions for a successful welfare program, undermined Cherokee potential by casting them as dependents. He frequently wrote restrained letters to Harrington and the other Area Directors requesting greater discretion in directing Cherokee affairs, although he always submitted his decision to their approval. According to Pierce, the BIA often failed to live up to its promises. "I've seen the BIA," he said. "I've seen the United States Public Health service. I've seen all other kinds of groups that say they're there to help you and yet when they come and after they're gone, you haven't been helped." Because unlike other conservatives he considered a persistent tribal identity essential even in the context of acculturation, he explained this deficiency by pointing out that the Bureau circumvented the Cherokee people. "So we [the tribal government] have established an office in Tahlequah" to serve as a bridge, he announced proudly.[34]

Although Keeler, Pierce, and their close associates espoused an undeniably conservative attitude, they insisted on the validity of an autonomous Cherokee Nation. Historian Warren Metcalf found within this Cold War mindset "motivations inconsonant

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[34] "Chief Says Tribe Must Advance," *Cherokee Nation News*; "Cherokee Tribal Chief is Phillips Man of Action," *Cherokee Nation News*, 21 October 1969, 3. Keeler to Virgil Harrington, 27 January 1966, Pierce Papers, Box 18, Folder 117; Pierce interview, 6 May 1967.

with the actual needs of Indian people." Indeed, in the hands of individuals like Senator Arthur Watkins and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Dillon Myer, conservative politics wreaked havoc in Native communities across the country in the tragic form of termination. Keeler's conservatism, however, was tempered by his commitment to pluralism and Cherokee sovereignty, as his dealings with the ICC revealed. As mentioned, the ICC settlement in the 1960s was his first step in rebuilding the Cherokee Nation. Because of their reluctance fully to trust the BIA, he and Pierce considered it essential to put the claims money in the control of the Cherokee Nation. The bill that granted the Cherokee their payment provided for individual payments to be made to those on the tribal rolls or their heirs. This arrangement in itself was a victory for Cherokee sovereignty, for it guaranteed that the money went directly to Cherokee, bypassing the BIA.[35]

After initial per capita payments, approximately two million dollars of residual funds remained. Rather than making a decision behind closed doors, Keeler sought the opinion of the Cherokee people. He held meetings in local communities, which he himself attended, and he mailed questionnaires to every member on the rolls. The forms were simple. They asked respondents to identify themselves by name, residence, and roll number or the name of the original enrollee. It asked enrollees what they "suggest that tribal funds be used for: Per Capita Payment OR educational program, housing program, old folks home for Cherokees, invest in business to provide jobs for Cherokees." The single sheet also had space for comments.[36]

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[35] R. Warren Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy: The Discarded Indians of Utah* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 11; "Summary Report," 8 April 1964.

[36] "Supplementary Funds Questionnaire," Keeler Collection, Box 33, Folder 250.

Keeler received hundreds and hundreds of responses. "We want our money!" demanded an overwhelming percentage. Because of the nature of Cherokee enrollment processes, the majority of those who received the questionnaire were from an older generation. Their responses reflected a clear age bias. Enrollee Ella Still, for instance, opted for a per capita payment and commented, "I am alone no children getting up in years and others to [sic] may not live to see...the old Folks home for us Cherokees." Many people expressed the same sentiment. A second common justification for per capita payments was financial need. "It is my opinion that those who are in favor of other than Per Capita payment are already financially secure or expect to get a political job out of the set up," wrote one respondent. Being "philanthropic" was a luxury that he could not afford. Others talked of needing the money for home repairs, childcare, and supplies as basic as bread. They objected to using the funds for the cultural center, which many referred to as a "shrine," when their basic needs remained unsatisfied.[37]

Many respondents demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding about the conditions in their own communities. They replied, "it seems to me that other departments are now producing a lot of the above suggestions." Enrollee Edgar McNack dismissively replied that "there are other arrangements for schools." Meanwhile, members of the younger generation like Don Bread, Wesley Proctor, and George Groundhog expressed alarm about those very schools. Particularly among the older generation, Cherokee country seemed to lack a sense of community. Keeler so often

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[37] "Suggestions for Use of Surplus Funds," Keeler Collection, Box 33, Folders 250-252. "Cherokee Residual Funds: Letters of Complaint," Pierce Papers, Box 33, Folders 270-271.

received criticism for being self-serving, and yet the responses on the questionnaire reveal tangible selfishness on the part of many of his fellow Cherokees.[38]

Despite the hundreds of surveys and petitions demanding individual disbursement, Keeler favored investing the funds. Addressing a town hall meeting in Maryetta, the Chief explained his position. Firstly, he stressed that per capita payments would have been under thirty dollars per person. Additionally, he recalled conversations with parents and younger Cherokees who hoped the money would be put toward their future. He estimated that their number was more than twice that of those requesting per capita payments. The majority of Cherokees, he believed, "wanted programs that would help them get jobs through industrial development, raise their standard of living, provide credit loans for education and land and housing, and preserve the history and culture of the Cherokees." While the questionnaires' respondents insisted on instant gratification, Keeler recognized that meaningful, enduring reform would take time.[39] He saw this as the ideal opportunity to realize his goals of creating a self-sustaining Cherokee population.

Of course, Keeler assumed that the tribal population shared his aspirations. He carefully identified what he had determined to be "the wants of our people," which directed his efforts at reform and renewal. Underwriting each of his tenets was the belief "that the great majority of our people, regardless of degree of blood, want to continue being recognized as Cherokee." The language should be preserved, in part by being incorporated into the school curriculum, and they should be free to practice their traditional religion if they so desired. At the same time, he had learned that people were

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[38] Bread interview; Proctor interview; Groundhog interview; "Suggestions for Use of Surplus Funds," Keeler Collection; "Cherokee Residual Funds," Pierce Papers.

[39] "Chief Speaks at Maryetta Meeting," *Cherokee Nation News*, 26 March 1968, 1; Keeler, "Needed: Prescription for Rehabilitation Welfare."

"just as anxious as any to have the normal things for their families, such as a good home; an opportunity to earn their own living; to have their children receive a good education; and to enjoy a full life."[40] Again, modern comforts and traditional culture seemed perfectly compatible to Keeler.

During the period from 1964 to 1968, as settlement money filtered into a variety of projects, business in Cherokee country boomed. Phillips 66 built a new gas station on tribal lands. Construction began on the cultural center, amphitheater, hotel, and restaurant. Initially, an outside company owned the restaurant, but the Cherokee Nation bought them out by 1968. McCall Industries, a textile manufacturer, opened a plant in Tahlequah. With the help of Pierce, the Cherokees reacquired over 2,500 acres of their former land in March of 1968. Business Manager Ralph Keen then used the land as the site for the new tribal complex, a tangible testament to the stunning growth of tribal infrastructure. That same year, the tribe developed its first flag and seal to provide symbols of its growing assertiveness. By the end of the year, fifty-seven full-time Cherokee employees were on the tribal payroll, not counting those who worked for the museum and cultural center. They paid taxes on tribal lands for the first time since statehood, which Keen saw as a significant reversal "after so many years of inactivity in Tribal Business Operations."[41]

Don Bread, an employee at the Cultural Center, explained Keeler's program from the perspective of the average Cherokee citizen—and one who benefitted from the employment opportunities. The Cultural Center mattered "because through this project we're going to have more people coming in, therefore, we're going to have to have more

[40] "A Message to the Cherokees: Chief Keeler Submits Business Plans," *Cherokee Nation News*, 27 May 1969, 1.
[41] "McCall Industries Comes to Tahlequah," *Cherokee Nation News*, 15 February 1968, 1.

accommodations, have to have more stores, more motels...Through these motels, they'll begin to hire other Indian people and this is the way that the Cultural Center will benefit the Cherokee." Upon reflection, Bread skeptically added, "If you want to go into that much detail, Hell, any business that comes here is going to do that." The youth made that observation almost as an insult. Nevertheless, Keeler would have agreed enthusiastically. He acknowledged that there were problems—mismanagement, interpersonal conflicts—but he insisted that "we are moving forward." His business development programs had started to create a chain reaction of small successes that would enable the Cherokee to "become self-supporting citizens" if they retained their faith and kept working.[42]

The Chief, however, was not content with economic build-up alone. Keeler opened the 1968 Cherokee National Holiday with a speech about Cherokee successes. True to his conservative politics, he started by situating Cherokee citizens within the American system, stressing the importance of supporting Oklahoma Congressmen Mike Monroney and Ed Edmondson, both of whom were in attendance. Maybe they could not vote for their chief, but they could vote for their Senators. Keeler then switched to reflecting on the past year's progress. He claimed to be "surprised" by just how much money his tribal programs had earned for the tribe. There was "a real bit of life" in the Cherokee Nation. In the next year, they would hold elections for community representatives. New arts and craft centers were ready for debut. More importantly, Keen was about to publish a report on the Cherokee's finances. Keeler saw the dissemination of information as an important milestone because "here for the first time you've been able, the tribe has been able, to have in its hand information about how much money is

[42] "Message to the Cherokees: The Cherokee Nation News Lauded as Community Asset," *Cherokee Nation News*, 30 September 1969, 1.

being spent and where it's going. And when you folks have a chance to review it, you folks are going to feel just as proud as I felt last night when I saw these figures." The Cherokees "are on the march," and their progress depended on every individual Cherokee.[43]

The lack of community cohesion that Keeler had witnessed in the response to the residual funds concerned him. In tandem with industrialization, Keeler sought to develop grassroots community support and commitment. Others noted the lack of cohesion as well. Don Bread felt that "we have so much unrest in the Cherokee tribe now," largely because of petty jealousies. The Cherokee community desperately needed leaders who could "bring them all together and forget their personal feelings." Community development was nothing without the underlying sense of mutual accountability and neighborliness. Even the members of the Original Cherokee Community Organization, which was formed in the late 1960s, were trying to reunite what they saw as a fractured community.[44]

Keeler wholeheartedly agreed. He asked them to honor to the "clanship tendency" of Cherokee culture. According to Keeler, "community means something shared with others; something that has to do with the communal experience of the people; a place where common interests are shared; where people work together; where trouble or misunderstandings between people can be settled when they occur." Like Bread, he pointed out that material interest was insufficient to foster the sense of togetherness that the Nation needed. Instead, true community was based on "mutual respect, trust, and

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[43] Cherokee National Holiday, recorded by J. W. Tyner, 7 September 1968, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, T-309-2.
[44] Bread interview; Proctor interview.

tolerance," all of which he believed Indians, as a manifestation of their kin-oriented culture, had a unique capacity to develop.[45]

The foundation of community was the participation of individual members, for "[i]f they are to be happy with the programs, they must participate in their formation." Community spirit could not be dictated but had to be created from within. "No influence or authority in the affairs of any people can have more importance than their own leadership and followership," he emphasized.[46] One success story of local leadership that the Nation highlighted was the network of arts and crafts centers, which held classes that produced marketable products. The flagship center was built near Ft. Smith, and in the first round of instruction had a high enrollment—thirty-eight students. The program was so successful that nearby Bull Hollow wanted pottery and ceramics instruction as well. The teacher at the original Mulberry Hollow center, however, did not have time to run a second location, so he selected one of his students as the instructor for Bull Hollow. Business Manager Ralph Keen hailed this as "a major breakthrough in community development whereby a Cherokee has gained knowledge and who is not only able but very willing to share his learned experience with other Cherokees and other communities." Two years later, eleven such centers operated in a network of local management that confirmed Keeler's underlying faith in individual, capitalistic initiative.[47]

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[45] "A Message to the Cherokee: Knowledge of Individual Needs a Step Toward Community Improvement," *Cherokee nation News*, 7 Oct 1969, 1.

[46] "A Message to the Cherokee: Chief Keeler Appeals for Tribal Cooperation," *Cherokee Nation News*, 6 May 1969, 1; "A Message to the Cherokee: Knowledge of Individual Needs a Step Toward Community Improvement," *Cherokee Nation News*, 7 October 1969, 1.

[47] *Cherokee Nation Newsletter*, 9 November 1967, 16 November 1967, and 21 December 1967, American Indian File, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 1, Folder 13.

The Executive Committee took their commitment to community-run programs seriously. The town of Greasey, located to the south of Stillwell, was one of the first communities to elect representatives and develop a plan of action. In the winter of 1968, they voted to build a baseball and recreation park. Keen expressed concern when the University of Oklahoma's American Indian Institute stepped into take over the ballpark's construction. The Business Manager insisted that the Institute "recognize the existing community organizations and their elected officials." The tribe was perfectly willing to work with the Institute or "any other resources agency that is available to us to try and achieve every possible advancement for the Cherokee people." The condition, however, was that these outside agencies cooperate with local communities, acting merely as providers of aid and advice and not usurping the people's autonomy.[48] Ultimately, the Institute stepped aside in favor of local organizers, a victory for Keeler's fledgling community organizing efforts and, by extension, the Nation as a whole.

W. W. Keeler felt confident that his industrialization and community development programs were the best course of action for the Cherokees. Others were less convinced. In a saga repeated in tribal communities across the country, one group in particular emerged to oppose the Principal Chief. Factionalism was perhaps an inherent aspect of the Native nation-building process in twentieth-century America.[49] In Cherokee country, the Original Cherokee Community Organization, a group primarily comprised of young full-bloods and led by George Groundhog, began a protracted campaign against the Keeler and what they saw as his destructive, exploitative programs. According to member

[48] "Greasey Community Meeting," *Cherokee Nation News*, 2 January 1968; Ralph Keen to Boyce Timmons, 7 June 1968, American Indian Institute Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma, Box 3, Folder 23.

[49] Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy,* 17-18.

Wesley Proctor, the OCCO intended "to stop the things that is being done to the Cherokees" and "to cope with the white society." The BIA had tried to help and failed; it was time to look for alternatives. They reached out to local Cherokees through radio programs and a short paper called *The Cherokee Report*, both of which they produced in English and in Cherokee. According to their publications, bureaucracy was the enemy. "All it has done to the Indian is made a drunk out of him or put him on welfare," said Proctor. To the OCCO, Keeler's economic initiatives only created more impersonal officialdom. Additionally, the new businesses and programs strove "to make a Cherokee Indian into a white man." Hence, the OCCO took it upon themselves to defend their fellow full-bloods from annihilation via assimilation, for their conception of identity did not distinguish between total assimilation and the more pluralist form of acculturation promoted by Keeler.[50]

A conflict of a similar nature erupted years earlier on among the Utes in Utah. Like in Oklahoma, a group of full-blood emerged as the primary force of opposition. Their crisis was perhaps more critical, for they faced termination, a fate that never threatened the Cherokees in Oklahoma. Known as the "True Utes," these full-blood Indians urged a return to traditionalism, predicated on the expulsion of all federal and state intrusions. Both the OCCO and the True Utes saw bureaucratic government as a tool of white power that smothered self-determination and ignored the voices of the largely unacculturated full-bloods. Among the Utes, the conflict likewise grew out of disagreements over the best use of settlement funds. In this case, the mixed-bloods demanded per capita payments and the full-blood True Utes objected, while the OCCO and other older tribal members objected to Keeler's investment plans because they

[50] Proctor interview.

diluted the benefits for full-bloods by extending jobs and services to community members with lower blood quantum.[51] The difference was the context: the government was targeting the Utes for termination, and the True Utes knew surrendering control of tribal funds meant the end of the tribe. The details, however, are inconsequential. Despite the different circumstances, the Ute case reveals that the situation in Cherokee country represented a larger national trend of intra-tribal conflict.

In addition to issues of blood and generation, the OCCO disagreed with Keeler's use of tribal funds for cultural matters. They attacked the Cultural Center. In a scathingly sarcastic editorial, OCCO co-founder Scott McLemore wrote,

> I know that you Cherokee people don't worry about money because 100,000 (one hundred thousand) dollars was donated out of your Tribal funds and you people didn't say or do a thing about it. That money was donated completely out of your control and invested into the Cultural Center which looks like a Mexican slum….But why worry about it. It was only money that could have been used for your children's education and could have been invested into something more useful. And it is only the white merchants that will benefit from it.

The program to which they objected most strenuously, however, was the planned Trail of Tears drama. "It would be a little different if this was a play where the Cherokees weren't killed and driven like animals by the white man," a spokesman explained. Keeler intended to develop the drama as part of a museum complex that included a living history village and the Cultural Center in order to promote and preserve Cherokee history. From the perspective of the OCCO, however, asking Cherokees to reenact the Trail of Tears for a white audience was tantamount to asking them to participate in their own victimization. "How many tourists do you think would go see a drama of Custer's Last Stand?" they

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[51] Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy,* 190-192, 88-90.

demanded, and not without merit. The only lesson that whites would learn is that Indians could be exploited, which would leave them open to renewed abuse.[52]

In early 1969, OCCO founder George Groundhog warned that tensions in Cherokee country had grown so fraught that violence was imminent.[53] Rather than physical altercations, however, Groundhog and the OCCO took the fight to the courts. That autumn, Groundhog and several of the organization's other members hired Cherokee attorney Stuart Trapp and brought a lawsuit against Keeler, the Secretary of Interior, Area Director Virgil Harrington, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, and the entire Executive Committee.

The suit claimed to "air the grievances of the Cherokee people at the White structure of power over them." They asked for the removal of Keeler and the Committee on the following grounds: First, that the practice of appointing chiefs denied the Cherokee their federally-guaranteed rights, "which deprivation in turn causes plaintiffs and Cherokees generally to be powerless and empoverished [sic]." Second, they alleged that Keeler did not meet the "appropriate" requirements for Cherokee membership, arguing that the "degree of blood" standard was arbitrary, although the appellate court later noted that they provided no alternative criteria. Elsewhere, Groundhog explained that "a Cherokee is Cherokee not by blood but by sociological norms," the standards of which he never defined. Third, they called the Executive Committee "an exercise of White power undertaken and continued in the false guise of being Cherokee

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[52] *Cherokee Report*, 1 May 1968, American Indian Institute Collection, Box 3, Folder 26; Transcripts of Original Cherokee Community Organization radio program, 9 July 1970, Keeler Collection, Box 1, Folder 9. As Don Bread mentions in his interview, the Tsa-La-Gi drama was actually based on a reenactment done by the Eastern Cherokees in North Carolina. Keeler himself visited the Eastern band to research for the Oklahoma version.

[53] Groundhog interview.

management, which precludes actual Cherokee management of Cherokee affairs." They exerted this power under "false and racist concepts." Because Keeler and his Executive Committee were not "real" Cherokees—a concept that remained nebulous—they inherently operated as a form of oppression. Ultimately, the Groundhog lawsuit sought to pare the mainstream white American taint from the Cherokee Nation.[54]

Long before the lawsuit became public, tribal leaders condemned the OCCO. On January 2, 1968, the *Cherokee Newsletter* addressed the growing tensions directly. Keen proclaimed, "The following people: Stuart Trapp, Armin Seager, Scott McLemore and Andrew Dreadfulwater are not associated with this office. We know nothing of their work or affiliations with the Cherokee Tribe or Cherokee Nation, as a working organization." Essentially, they repudiated the OCCO. Once the litigation was in process, Keeler, his fellow defendants, and Pierce, who served as an attorney on the case, avoided direct engagement. Keeler began penning a weekly column entitled "A Message to the Cherokees," in which he cautiously fought back by detailing the tribes' successes during his tenure as Principal Chief. He dealt with issues ranging from housing projects to new parks and office staff. He never addressed the controversy outright, except to repeat his assurance that the controversy was a simple misunderstanding. "I believe when people are fully informed there is reason to feel we will have the support of the Cherokee as we go forward together," was his stalwart reply.

Meanwhile, the official tribal newspaper made it clear whose side they were on. The staff was largely from Keeler's generation but contained an array of blood degrees. The real difference between them and the OCCO was ideological. Keeler's fellow

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[54] Groundhog, et al, vs. Keeler, et al, United States Appellate Court, 23 January 1970, N. B. Johnson Papers, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Box 3, Folder 17; Keeler; "Indian Tribes Given Right to Choose Own Chiefs," *The Oklahoman*, 29 November 1970, 25.

administrators embraced his conservative ethic based on social pluralism and economic integration. Anna Kilpatrick, director of the arts and crafts programs and editor of the *Cherokee Nation News*, ran a series of articles in defense of the Keeler administration. She declared, "The Cherokee Nation is as prosperous as it has been in many a year. The Cherokee Nation is as well organized as it has been in many years. It has one of the hardest working men for its chief, one who works for the Cherokees interest and has the kindest heart for his people." The lawsuit was the result of "folly" and "misinformation." The next issue printed letters to the editor thanking the Chief. It also contained a poem by Robert Belt, Jr. entitled simply "Hate." The four-line poem warned, "That is what hate will do./It will bring darkness to you./Hate is like a snake:/it will poison you." Clearly, the OCCO was the snake, and their hatred was about to poison the Cherokee Nation.[55]

Throughout the summer, the *Cherokee Nation News* continued its efforts to discredit the OCCO. The committee of community representatives passed a resolution to "pledge [their] continued support and express appreciation to Principal Chief Keeler for the outstanding leadership he gives to the Cherokee people." The paper also printed petitions in favor of Keeler from the Indian Women's Club of Claremore and the Will Rogers Memorial Community. Headlines portrayed the Groundhog lawsuit as "Against Cherokee," a threat to the entire tribe, and therefore far more dangerous and reprehensible than a personal vendetta.[56]

Often, the rhetoric of Keeler's administration and the OCCO appeared remarkably similar. "We do not want charity—We do want opportunity," declared *The Cherokee*

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[55] "Foreign Activists Mislead Small Group of Cherokees," *Cherokee Nation News* 24 June 1969, 1; *Cherokee Nation News*, 1 July 1969.

[56] "OCCO Out to Axe the Cherokee Nation," *Cherokee Nation News*, 12 August 1969, 2; *Cherokee Nation News,* 27 June 1969, 1.

Report. In their funding request report, they wrote that "the most effective help must come from within." The Chief constantly warned the dangers of handouts and the importance of local leadership, as well as the need for unity. Likewise, the OCCO believed that "power is a group of people working together." Both Keeler and the OCCO stressed the idea of community. Their differences arose out of their attitude toward acculturation. The OCCO saw assimilation as a slippery slope to oppression under a white regime. Cherokees could only retain their identity by policing their membership and expelling pretenders like Keeler. In contrast, Keeler's fluid conception of identity could withstand adaptation.[57]

Rather than attacking individual Cherokees, the Keeler apparatus went after the outside organizations that funded the OCCO. The Carnegie Corporation, devoted to spreading knowledge and empowering minority populations, and the Field Foundation, which sought to increase civic participation through equal rights advocacy, both backed the full-blood organization. The Carnegie Project had been active in northeastern Oklahoma for several years implementing a cross-cultural literacy and education research program, and there was a lengthy history of distrust on the part of the Cherokee leaders, who viewed the Project's prominent anthropologist Sol Tax as a subversive. The Field Foundation, meanwhile, was a newcomer to Cherokee country, although it had an entire branch devoted to indigenous issues. In fact, the foundation once supported ARROW, Inc, an offshoot of the National Congress of American Indians on whose board of directors sat Keeler. Nevertheless, Keeler now approached both foundations with the scorn he reserved for anthropologists, whom he considered meddling, manipulative

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[57] *The Cherokee Report*, 1 May 1968, American Indian Institute Collection; OCCO Report to the Field Foundation, no date, Keeler Collection, Box 1, Folder 9.

outsiders—an interesting twist in the context of the OCCO's criticism of the Chief's marginal status. The *Cherokee Nation News* ran headlines like "Foreign Activists Mislead Small Group of Cherokees." The Field Foundation and the Carnegie Foundations were "eroding and undermining" Cherokee sovereignty by interfering in tribal politics. "It [was] plain to everyone that Mr. Trapp and Field Foundation in New York are striving to manipulate the Cherokee affairs" for their own insidious ends. By accepting aid from the Field Foundation, asserted the public relations arm of the tribe, the OCCO hypocritically invited the white power structure into Cherokee country.[58]

Keeler's conservative politics reappeared in this discussion. A concerned Cherokee citizen cautioned, "I think we should take a firm stand against such activist groups as this because they are as bad as the Black Panthers in this country." Keeler agreed with this sentiment. In his opinion, the Black Panthers had done nothing but cause a public backlash against African-American civil rights. When he received criticism for speaking out against the American Indian Movement's violent tactics, he replied, "[W]hen I measure what they accomplish against what we have been able to get for the Indians without violence, I can't justify their actions." The OCCO might not have resorted to violence, but their aggressive approach still troubled Keeler. He was highly offended when Cherokee lawyer Joseph Muskrat reproached the BIA for its failures by painting "the poor Indian as a vulture camping around the carcass of a cow and eating away until every morsel is gone—just as low as a wild animal." Such a dramatic description overlooked significant Native achievements despite BIA disappointments and, more importantly, harmed the Indians' public image. He could not suppress the

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[58] Cobb, "Devils in Disguise," 465; *The Field Foundation Inc.: A Review of Its Activities for the Two Years Ended September 30, 1957* (Chicago: The Field Foundation, 1957); "Stuart Trapp and Groundhog Lawsuit Against Cherokee Dismissed in Federal Court," *Cherokee Nation News*, 14 October 1969, 1.

"feeling that the majority of the gains that have been won by the Indians have been won because of the general public's sympathy for the wrongs that were doe Indians many years ago," but Muskrat's pessimism dehumanized Indians and made them less sympathetic to the voting public. The Groundhog lawsuit used the same sort of belligerent tactics that dwelled on the negative and therefore threatened to stall Cherokee progress.[59]

To Keeler, the OCCO and the Field Foundation embodied frightening liberal extremes. He envisioned the onset of dependency if the Field Foundation continued to leak money into the Cherokee community, and he convinced himself that the OCCO was going to "set back in the woods and have the Cherokees come to [them] for handouts of money." As a committed acculturationist, he wanted to bring his fellow Indians out of the woods and into the twentieth century. Even after the lawsuit fell apart in the appeals process, Keeler encouraged Earl Boyd Pierce to "go after the Field Foundation for reimbursement of the unnecessary expense they caused the Tribe in defending the Groundhog Case." Pierce could not quite forgive a group he saw as "the initiators of the idea to harm the United States with the vehicle of Indian poverty." For his part, Keeler

[59] Paula McSpadden Love to Pierce, 13 October 1969, Pierce Papers, Box 59, Folder 474; Keeler to Becky Lena, 14 Feb 1973, Keeler Collection, Box 39, Folder 271; Keeler to Alice Marriott, 21 December 1972, Keeler Collection, Box 39, Folder 217; Harry J. W. Belving to Keeler, 25 March 1971, Keeler Collection, Box 1, Folder 9; At the same time that the OCCO launched its campaign against Keeler, business manager Ralph Keen resigned his position. The rumors surrounding his sudden departure stirred further concern. Keen left after years of bickering within the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee conducted an internal audit, printing the results on the front page of the *Cherokee Nation News*. Keen apparently did not get along well with other members of the Committee, and he actually went to work for the OCCO. The split appears to have been temporary, however, for by 1971, Keeler sought his advice on appointments to the constitutional convention.

resented the waste of tribal resources that could more usefully have been employed in further capitalist development.[60]

As an increasingly vigorous Principal Chief, Keeler did not simply rely on rhetorical battles to quell the liberal threat of the OCCO. Rather, he and the tribal government sought to neutralize dissent by actively making his conservative yet progressive agenda accessible to the public. The first step in combating criticism and, more importantly, developing communities was communication. A massive public relations effort coincided with heightened attacks on the Chief and his administration. On October 12, 1967, Keen and his fellow Committee member Crosslin Smith printed the first tribal newsletter, which they "intended to serve as a means of informing members of the Cherokee Nation of the work being done within the Nation, to help improve general living conditions of Cherokees." At first, they distributed copies at no charge. The initial issues were a page or two in length and presented matter-of-fact accounts of efforts like the mutual help housing program, new businesses like the Phillips station and McCall Industries, and notices of community meetings. Over time, it increased in size and substance. After five months, the newsletter became the *Cherokee Nation News*, a traditional newspaper with everything from features to advice columns to advertisements. Now, the paper sold for five cents, hardly a prohibitive expense.

In addition to establishing the newspaper, Keeler encouraged individual communities to organize and hold meetings. He frequently sent a tribal representative like Business Managers Ralph Keen to these gatherings, and he continued to attend as well. Future Chief Wilma Mankiller recalled that "many elders in rural areas remember

[60] Pierce to Keeler, 16 March 1971, Pierce Papers, Box 59, Folder 476; Keeler to Pierce, 22 March 1973, Pierce Papers, Box 59, Folder 479; Pierce to Ernie Deane, 6 March 1973, Keeler Collection, Box 1, Folder 9.

when Keeler came to their communities," and they harbored a deep respect for his work as their leader—a change in attitude from their previous outrage over the use of residual funds. Mankiller also expressed her personal respect for the Chief, whom she credited with laying the foundations on which she stood. In May of 1968, Keeler created the position of Tribal Field Specialist, whose sole job was to attend various community meetings to act as a liaison between the Cherokee Nation and its citizens. The first man to hold the position, Crosslin Smith, spoke Cherokee, which meant he would be able to reach an even greater number of tribesmen. In his first month of work, he visited thirty-five communities.[61]

Now that there was an intermediary to coordinate community organizations, Keeler announced the next phase of his plan: elections for community representatives. He saw these local elections as "a forerunner of the situation in which the Cherokee can participate in the regular democratic processes to elect all of their representatives." Moreover, they would have a practical application at a grassroots level. Once a community selected its spokespersons and "in order to hold the community people together as an organization, these people are encouraged to assisted to work together to start a project that will benefit their children." After agreeing on a project, the group requested funds from the Cherokee Nation, organized fundraisers, and applied for state and federal grants. The Greasey ballpark grew out of this initiative. Relying on local polls would ensure that funds were used in a way that benefitted the greatest number of

[61] Wilma Mankiller, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*, edited by Michael Wallis (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993): 181, 217; "Chief Creates New Position," *Cherokee Nation News*, 7 May 1968, 8.

Cherokees. Not to mention, the autonomous process met Keeler's requirements for individual empowerment.[62]

Because of his faith in democracy and self-sufficiency, Keeler refused to abandon his dream of National elections. He began advocating this change in the 1950s. "Cherokees have every right," he asserted, "to have a voice in decisions concerning tribal fund spending programs, and to elect their leaders, rather than have them appointed." Previously, insufficient funds and lack of tribal unity had made such elections impossible, but in a recorded message on April 9, 1968, Keeler announced the formation of a formal committee to investigate the possibility of a national vote.[63]

He drew on his political connections to help push the measure through Congress. He began with his fellow leaders of the Five Tribes, promoting the measure at the Inter-Tribal Council sessions in 1968. He convinced the other tribes to pool their political capital and present a joint bill before Congress. Then he wrote to Oklahoma Governor Dewey Bartlett, Senators Fred Harris and Ed Edmonson, and various House representatives. Harris, married to Comanche activist LaDonna Harris, proved to be a key ally and presented the bill on the Senate floor. Finally, on October 22, 1970, Public Law 91-495 received Congressional approval, restoring democracy to the Cherokee Nation. The first elections since 1906 would be held in less than a year. First, however, the Executive Committee needed to set election criteria and procedures. Keeler formed another committee that included not only Committee members and BIA officials but also

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[62] "Jay Chamber Welcomes Chief, Cherokee Executive Committee," *Cherokee Nation News*, 7 May 1968, 1; Cherokee National Holiday, recorded by Tyner; "Report to a Subcommittee," *Cherokee Nation News*, 14 May 1968, 8.

[63] "Report of Meeting of the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes, Muskogee, Oklahoma, July 10, 1957," 10 July 1957, American Indian Institute Collection, Box 3, Folder 11; Cherokee National Holiday, recorded by Tyner.

community representatives and other qualified Cherokees. In an effort at reconciliation, Keeler included George Groundhog as well.[64]

The committee decided to draw on the standards of the 1839 constitution, with a few alterations. Voting was open to all enrolled citizens, both those on the Dawes rolls and their descendents, except in cases where an individual claimed membership in another tribe. They decided to permit absentee voting so those Cherokee enrollees who lived outside of Oklahoma could express their views, too. Chiefs were to serve four year terms. In order to qualify, a candidate must be at least 35 and an American citizen as well as "citizens by blood of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma." The committee imposed no residency requirements. These regulations represented a victory for Keeler's dynamic conception of Cherokee identity. Groundhog preferred identification based on "sociological" considerations, which would almost certainly have disqualified a non-resident or someone with 1/32 blood quantum—which under these rules was sufficient.[65]

Although Keeler initially planned to retire, he decided to run for a last four years as Principal Chief. He ran against his former Business Manager Ralph Keen and Reverend Samuel Hider, a prominent spiritual leader. In his campaign, he emphasized the concrete results that he produced over the past two decades. Keeler was "A Proven Chief," declared his promotional pamphlets. As evidence, he offered the tribe's financial reserves. When Truman first appointed him, the Cherokees owed the federal government approximately two million dollars. His efforts had reversed the trend, generating a net

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[64] "Report of meeting of The Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes held at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, January 10, 1968—10:00 A.M.," 10 January 1968, American Indian File, Box 3, Folder 7; Keeler to Overton James, 8 January 1968, American Indian File, Box 3, Folder 7. "Indian Tribes Given Right to Choose Own Chiefs," *The Oklahoman* 29 November 70, 25.

[65] The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma Election Regulations, Keeler Collection, Box 42, Folder 301; "Indian Tribes Given Right to Choose Own Chiefs," *The Oklahoman* 29 November 70, 25.

worth of nearly eight million dollars, with over five million in land holdings. The pamphlet also catalogue the practical successes of programs in health and sanitation, employment, education, communication, and construction, which included new homes and offices as well as the restaurant and Cultural Center. Again, he emphasized his commitment to integrating Indians into a larger American network, asserting his "devotion to the proposition that all Americans can achieve dignity and contribute to the U.S. economic system." Along with the pamphlets, he mailed a letter that blended his current role as chief with his campaign to retain the office. After thanking recipients for registering to vote, he described the elections as a pivotal moment for the tribe. Reverting to his rhetoric about the importance of progress, he insisted that the election would determine "which way we want our Nation to go. Shall we progress as we have in recent times? Or shall we reverse our path and be torn by dissent and frustration?" He emphasized material growth over cultural permanence. For Keeler, improving the tribe's financial condition established the base of tribal unity, as he made clear by framing traditionalist, isolationist sentiments as a harbinger of disintegration while at the same time promising Cherokee persistence. The handout's most striking image was a drawing of two clasping hands accompanied by a caption that read, "Bill Keeler is dedicated to Cherokee unity." According to his campaign literature, the Principal Chief firmly believed that social and cultural wholeness required a solid financial foundation, which was not to say he was an assimilationist, and he took an active, aggressive stance regarding the tribe's future.[66]

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[66] "A Proven Chief," Keeler's election pamphlet, 1971, Keeler Collection, Box 2, Folder 11; Keeler to "Dear Friend," no date, Keeler Collection, Box 2, Folder 11. Keeler had this letter and a copy of his pamphlet sent to every registered voter.

Apparently, the tribe approved. Keen and Hider, Keeler's primary opponents, were both well-known in Cherokee communities—Keen in his former capacity as Business Manager and newspaper publisher, as well as his later associations with the OCCO, and Hider in his role as a prominent spiritual leader. Nevertheless, the current chief won a clear majority in every county. Out of over 10,000 ballots cast, 7,495 or nearly 75 percent voted for Keeler. Hider, his closest opponent, received only 16 percent of the vote while Keen barely received 7 percent.[67] This overwhelming victory could perhaps be read as a referendum on the past two decades of Keeler's leadership. Groundhog and the Original Cherokee Community Organization never produced the masses of dissatisfied Cherokees that they promised. Rather, most Cherokees supported Keeler's hybrid program of conservative and progressive ideals, which created space both for an indigenous community identity and a modern standard of living.

Following the election, the OCCO ceased their radical opposition of Keeler's administration. In their 1971 funding request to the Field Foundation, they toned down their rhetoric significantly. They still emphasized the importance of living among the Cherokees and sharing a cultural connection. However, instead of fighting the Cherokee Nation, they acknowledged that its programs had enjoyed success, and therefore they "adopted this proposal as a means of supplementing these programs instead of Duplicating them." They decided "to seek the endorsement of W. W. Keeler, Principal Chief of the Cherokees. This remains a commitment in spite of differences in political ideology and social backgrounds."[68] Their difference had not disappeared, but they

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[67] Election Returns, Keeler Collection, Box 43, File 303.

[68] OCCO Report to Field. In part, the OCCO was torn apart by internal feuding. One faction within the organization staged a takeover of their offices, alienating Groundhog and Trapp. They ended up suing each other, and the Field Foundation froze their bank accounts.

determined that cooperating with the tribal complex was a more effective means of reaching their goals, perhaps because they realized that their ultimate objectives—tribal autonomy and the betterment of individual Cherokee lives for the future—was the same as Keeler's. The Chief made this reconciliation possible in part because the combination of his conservative ethic with his commitment to pluralism offered a moderate alternative. More importantly, he followed through on his promises to enhance Cherokee sovereignty by securing popular elections.

Despite the landmark vote and the growing tribal complex, the Cherokee Nation remained legally symbolic. Without a constitution, the government apparatus was little more than a funnel for funds, and no one knew this better than the Executive Committee. In 1907, the new state of Oklahoma had voided the existing constitution. Ironically, the Committee proved its own powerlessness in a court case that came out of the 1974 election in which Ross Swimmer succeeded Keeler. The defeated candidates argued that the election was fraudulent because election committee rules conflicted with the Cherokee Constitution of 1839. Specifically, they objected to the lowering of age requirements from 35 to 30 years. Pierce and attorney Andrew Wilcoxson argued for the defense that the Cherokee Nation continued to exist "for the sole purpose of completing the task of enrollment, individual allotment, and dissolution of tribal government. The tribal courts have now been completely abolished; the tribal laws cannot be enforced in federal courts." The former constitution had no power because it was "written for a government that had ceased to exist." The U.S. District Court deciding the 1974 lawsuit

agreed, bluntly declaring that the Cherokees "do not possess the powers of self-government," and the judge dismissed the case for lack of jurisdiction.[69]

While Keeler was willing to use the legal reality as a matter of expediency, he was not content to accept the situation as permanent. For the past two decades he had steadily and incrementally enhanced the power of the tribal government. A new constitution was the final step in his program for the revitalization of the Cherokee nation. First there were the elections of community representatives, then the elections for chief, and now it was time to revise the constitution. He saw it as an opportunity to promote tribal unity and respond to the needs of the Cherokee public. In a press release announcing the formation of a commission to rewrite in 1972, Keeler, ever positive, declared that their goal was "to make it reflect a more responsive tribal leadership and fit the problems and opportunities of current times." Above all, Keeler believed the constitution needed to represent the "voice of the people." He began the public push at his inauguration.[70]

The committee he assembled presented a remarkable display of vibrancy and unity. Former enemies came together to promote the future of the Nation. Commodore "Red" Fourkiller, on the board of directors of the OCCO, served as a delegate. Some appointees had political connections to Keeler. Others, like J.D. Chase of the Office of Urban and Community Development, he chose for their skills. Non-resident Cherokees received three seats on the committee. Early in the selection process, there was a minor controversy over the geographical distribution of the members. Only three out of twenty-four hailed from the two most densely Indian-populated counties. The community

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[69] Drywater, et al, vs. Keeler, et al, United States District Court Eastern District of Oklahoma, 15 September 1975, Keeler Collection, Box 42, Folder 305.

[70] Press release, 30 December 1971, Keeler Collection, Box 3, Folder 12.

organizations for Keeler had pushed so hard served him well when the Piney Cherokee Community Organization in one of these counties wrote to Keeler to "protest most vigorously" the oversight. Keeler responded immediately, telling the offended community to submit recommendations for additional representatives. Within a month, they resolved the matter, and a second representative joined the commission. The Principal Chief even made provisions for non-English speakers to participate, ensuring that one of the members had sufficient ability to translate. "No group should be relegated to a 'no-voice,' 'second-class' Cherokee citizen status," he declared, and in preparing the committee he lived up to his promise.[71]

Keeler did not participate directly in writing the Constitution. Instead, he left his hand-picked successor, Ross Swimmer, in charge of proceedings, which occurred without significant setbacks or controversy. He did make several recommendations: an impeachment clause for elected officials, a call for a new convention every twenty years, and bicameral legislative body. The first two, indicative of Keeler's vibrant commitment to the democratic process, made it into the final draft. The committee decided on a simpler legislature of only 15 members in order to streamline the government, perhaps an indication of the influence of OCCO members like Fourkiller who feared the growth of an insensitive bureaucracy.

On June 26, 1976, the constitution passed, 6,000 to 700. The new Principal Chief Swimmer proudly declared that the reborn constitution granted "the Cherokees their own government again with greater participation through an elected council," representing the culmination of Keeler's hopes for the Nation. The document also reflected his conservatism. The preamble read as follows:

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[71] Keeler to Washbourne; Washbourne to Keeler.

> We the people of the Cherokee Nation, in order to preserve and enrich our tribal culture, achieve and maintain a desirable measure of prosperity, insure tranquility and to secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of freedom, acknowledging, with humility and gratitude, the goodness of the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe in permitting us so to do, and imploring his aid and guidance in its accomplishment--do ordain and establish this Constitution for the government of the Cherokee Nation.

"The Cherokee Nation is an inseparable part of the Federal Union," the constitution continued, acknowledging tribal sovereignty as implicitly subject to federal consent. Article XIV required all public officials to recite an oath to "preserve, protect, and defend" not only the Cherokee Nation but the United States as well. In general, tribal constitutions written after 1970 tend to "reflect a surging sense of self-governance, autonomy, and a purposeful distance from the federal and especially the state governments." The Cherokee Constitution of 1976, however, had more in common with an earlier generation of more deferential, less radical documents due to Keeler's lasting conservative influence that situated federal sovereignty and loyalty firmly ahead of tribal. Of course, part of this oath was also "to promote the culture, heritage, and traditions of the Cherokee Nation," demonstrating the counterpoint of Keeler's dynamic construction of Cherokee in modern America. The final draft even made provisions to respect clan relationships. Ultimately, the Constitution enacts both a pluralist conception of identity and a conservative worldview, making it truly representative of Keeler's tenure as Chief.[72]

With the Constitution's ratification, the Cherokee Nation entered a new era. The Nation now had economic, cultural, and legal foundations. Keeler's influence began to wane as he witnessed the fruition of the last of his initiatives and retired to the edge of

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[72] "Cherokees Adopt Tribal Constitution," *The Oklahoman*, 2 July 76, 21; The Cherokee Nation Constitution, 1976; David E. Wilkins and Sheryl Lightfoot. "Oaths of Office in Tribal Constitutions: Swearing Allegiance, but to Whom?" *The American Indian Quarterly* 32 (2008): 389-411.

Cherokee country near the Arkansas border. At his retirement ceremony, Keeler reflected that his years as Chief were "a bigger challenge than I'll ever have in this life—and I tried to handle it that way....It's been a work of love. I feel I've got more out of it than I put into it. The Cherokee people are wonderful people." And, thanks largely to Keeler's labors, the Cherokee were strong and united.[73]

While scholars typically approach the 1960s and 1970s as a time of crisis in Cherokee country and the United States in general, this essay has related a more positive narrative. The Cherokee Nation did indeed face challenges to its authority, both from internal factionalism and federal insensitivity. Nevertheless, the dominant story was one of regeneration. During Keeler's tenure as Principal Chief, the Cherokees grappled with the forces of modernization. Conservative and liberal ideals clashed against a backdrop of identity politics. Keeler's critics of all generations and backgrounds were justified in protesting the abridgement of self-determination represented by federal appointments, and they correctly identified his conservative ideals and desire to Americanize. Keeler, however, was not the federal government's pawn. He actively embraced a middle ground of pluralistic acculturation that enabled him to reassert tribal sovereignty through elections and a new Constitution. Understanding Cherokee revitalization in the context of Chief Keeler's political and cultural agenda portrays the conservative rhetoric of Cold War America from a fresh perspective. This narrative, in which a conservative chief with an acculturationist agenda served as his tribe's most successful advocate, offers an alternative to histories of mid-twentieth-century Native America that tend to focus on either the ultraconservative evils of termination or radical indigenous activism. Keeler

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[73] "Cherokees, Friends Salute W. W. Keeler," *The Oklahoman*, 22 November 1975, 56.

was a conservative activist, a supporter of Americanization who promoted tribal sovereignty.

Votes and a governing document did not fix everything, of course, but the Cherokee Nation has been in a perpetual state of renewal since the mid-1970s. The tribe continued to face the problems associated with poverty and minority status. Internal discord did not fade with Keeler, either—the ideological differences surrounding blood politics and generational experiences were too deep. Thirty years after Keeler retired, renewed conflict over citizenship and political representation nearly toppled the edifices of his success. The forward-thinking Chief, however, had pushed for periodic constitutional conventions, a provision incorporated into Article XV, Section 9 of the 1976 Constitution, and a committee met in 1999 to reevaluate their national system. They returned with a fresh interpretation of Cherokee sovereignty and a document that dealt with contemporary concerns. More importantly, they emerged with a new sense of tribal cohesion and purpose.[74] If only in its dynamic, adaptive character, the Cherokee Nation continues to reflect the influence of W. W. Keeler.

[74] Cherokee Constitution, 1976. Lemont, 17.

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