

## **Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word**

*By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – June 10, 2012*

Being in the right place at the right time is sometimes less about luck than it is heeding a call. And, rather than fame or fortune, the result can be something far more precious.

So it was when I heard about an historic event taking place last Saturday morning. Members of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation were coming by bus from tribal lands in Oklahoma and elsewhere to convene upon the sacred grounds of the Ocmulgee National Monument in Macon. The 80-100 citizens expected would be the largest gathering of Muscogee in Georgia since their forced relocation 200 years ago. Among dignitaries attending would be the Primary Chief, Second Chief, and Speaker of the Tribal Council – like having our President, Vice President, and Speaker of the House on hand together.

John Beaver, director and curator of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Museum and Cultural Center, was to depart that morning by bicycle to retrace the “Trail of Tears” traveled by his people in 1836-37 on a forced march to an imposed new home in the west. With assistant director Justin Giles driving a support vehicle, the two men are on a three-week mission to honor tribal history and reconnect newer generations with their ancestors. The actual Trail of Tears began from Fort Mitchell, Alabama, as the Muscogee had ceded the last of their Georgia lands to the United States under the Treaty of Indian Springs in 1825. But, Beaver and Giles chose to start from Ocmulgee because of its sacred heritage.

The Muscogee Nation invited local cyclists to join Beaver to begin his ride. For reasons I couldn't explain, I had to go. And, thankfully, my friend Eddie was quick to join me. With age, I've learned to err on the side of “yes” when adventure calls; this was a choice well made.

We arrived Saturday to a morning as bright and clear as any June day I can recall in Georgia, under a sky so deeply blue I wanted to reach out and touch it. A bus bearing the Great Seal of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation was parked near the steps of the park visitors' center. Muscogee citizens, guests, and media assembled for an hour-long service during which US Park Service officials, Macon's Mayor, Chief George Tiger, Second Chief Roger Barnett, Speaker of the Tribal Council Samuel Alexander, Beaver, and Giles each paid tribute to the occasion.

Chief Tiger led the assembly in a stirring hymn chanted softly in Muscogee, after which he explained the song, written by his ancestors, foretold of an appointed land where someday his people would meet and have a reunion. That day had come to this place, and, there I was, moved in ways words cannot explain.

The forced removal of the Muscogee – as well as the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole – from their southern lands is a dark moment in American history that can never be undone. As a descendent of European Americans who willfully inflicted unspeakable pain and hardship, I stood with a heavy heart witnessing Saturday's ceremony. But, there was no ill will among these good people who had travelled far in remembrance of tragic events. Instead, I felt warm embrace and reverent celebration of an enduring culture misguided abuse can never erase.

I'm puzzled by those in my country who abhor apology, as though admitting wrongs is a sign of weakness. A nation is but a collection of human beings. And, just as we are each individually imperfect, so too is the United States of America. The nation that forged the modern template for a democratic republic, fought twice to liberate the planet from tyrants, and continues to generously spread humanitarian aid is also the country that drove Native Americans from their ancestral lands and ripped Africans from their homeland and into slavery half a world away.

None of this darkens the brightest American achievements. But, I cannot ignore that these human tragedies were inflicted by this nation to whom I pledge allegiance. And, though I honor that allegiance, I have a higher calling to do right by all human beings, regardless of skin color, continent of origin, or religious faith.

Saying "I'm sorry," isn't only solace for the victims. Genuine regret is how we acknowledge the worst we are capable of when we allow self-righteousness to cloud the sober recognition of our limitations. To the Muscogee people, I am deeply sorry for the pain we caused you. And, I am eternally grateful for the healing you have brought to our shared history. In your language, Mvto (thanks).

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