

The legend of Tsali

James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1891).

As you read...

THE EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS

Some Cherokees successfully resisted removal. Some hid in the hills from federal soldiers; others returned later, many on foot. Over time, they purchased back their land from the U.S. government. The largest piece of that land, called Qualla Boundary, consists of about 80 square miles in eastern Swain County and northern Jackson County — a tiny fraction of the original Cherokee homeland.

The story of Tsali, retold here as it was remembered in the late nineteenth century, tells of the origin of the Eastern Band. The story has been told in a variety of ways through the years, always as an inspiration to the Cherokee of North Carolina.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What motivated Tsali to act?
2. According to this article, why did the U.S. allow some Cherokee to remain in North Carolina?
3. In the previous story about the Trail of Tears, the white soldier said that four Indians were forced to shoot an Indian chief and his children. This story describes the event in a similar way. Compare and contrast these two descriptions.
4. Why do you think the white soldiers would have had Cherokee shoot Tsali and his sons? Do you agree with the author of this story that it was to impress upon the Cherokee their hopelessness? What might some other reasons be?
5. In other versions of this story, Tsali asked his people to shoot him rather than be killed by white soldiers. If that were true, how would it change the meaning of this story?

One old man named Tsali, “Charley,” was seized with his wife, his brother, his three sons and their families. Exasperated at the brutality accorded his wife, who, being unable to travel fast, was prodded with bayonets to hasten her steps, he urged the other men to join with him in a dash for liberty. As he spoke in Cherokee the soldiers, although they heard, understood nothing until each warrior suddenly sprang upon the one nearest and endeavored to wrench his gun from him. The attack was so sudden and unexpected that one soldier was killed and the rest fled, while the Indians escaped to the mountains. Hundreds of others, some of them from the various stockades, managed also to escape to the mountains from time to time, where those who did not die of starvation subsisted on

roots and wild berries until the hunt was over. Finding it impracticable to secure these fugitives, General Scott finally tendered them a proposition, through (Colonel) W. H. Thomas, their most trusted friend, that if they would surrender Charley and his party for punishment, the rest would be allowed to remain until their case could be adjusted by the government. On hearing of the proposition, Charley voluntarily came in with his sons, offering himself as a sacrifice for his people. By command of General Scott, Charley, his brother, and the two elder sons were shot near the mouth of Tuckasegee, a detachment of Cherokee prisoners being compelled to do the shooting in order to impress upon the Indians the fact of their utter helplessness. From those fugitives thus permitted to remain originated the present eastern band of Cherokee.

On the web

A more recent retelling

<http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=60>

The website of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians tells a longer version of the legend of Tsali in which Tsali himself, faced with death, asks to die at his own people's hands.

Tsali in Legend

<http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/workshops/legends/Tslegends.html>

Other versions of the Tsali legend, from the North Carolina Museum of History.

Unto These Hills

<http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=9>

The sacrifice of Tsali is a central part of the popular outdoor drama *Unto These Hills*, performed every summer in Cherokee, North Carolina.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

<http://www.cherokee-nc.com/>

Their website includes history, legends and poetry, information about the Cherokee language, and more.

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