

The Five Civilized Indian Tribes

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A “civilized” Indian was one who found a way to tolerate and work with the foreigners who came from Europe.

I have a rather involved fantasy which I dip into now and then. I’m on a television quiz show where the top prize is a million dollars. I get past the half-million level and the big question comes. “For all the marbles,” the celebrated and color-coordinated game show host asks, “which of the following four Native American tribes was not one of the so-called ‘five civilized tribes’ of the Oklahoma Indian Territory?”

I look down at the list of possible answers:

- (A) Cherokee
- (B) Choctaw
- (C) Seneca
- (D) Seminole

The question is so obscure and hairy that half the nation’s viewers have beads of sweat popping out on their foreheads on my behalf. The rest head for the fridge, unable to deal with their emotions.

The rules of this quiz show allow me to phone a friend for help, or poll the audience or even have two of the incorrect answers removed from consideration. I don’t do any of these things. I look calmly at the host, his cobalt blue silk tie set against a powder blue dress shirt and light gray suit.

I lean back, staring into the depths of my own wisdom, and thoughtfully begin to enumerate aloud on my fingers.

“Well... hmm... let’s see, Regis... in Oklahoma we have the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole.

I guess that leaves (C) Seneca. That’s my final answer.” Regis hesitates a long, long time. Frowning, almost a pained look. “You sure you want to say that?” he pleads.

“Final answer,” I tell him again, blowing cigar smoke and firing a small registered handgun into the ceiling as flakes of dried cow manure fall from my boots. I calmly reach for my water.

Regis frowns, sucks in his breath and slowly exhales as he shakes his head. Sitting behind me in the support chair, my wife has fainted. All over America, people are soiling themselves.

Regis lets a pause big enough to drive a truck through, hang in the air. Then... “YOU’VE JUST WON A MILLION DOLLARS!”

Of course I have. As would have every elementary school kid in Oklahoma. We all studied the state's history and memorized those, quote, "five civilized tribes" endquote. At the time I was learning their names, I wondered if any of this knowledge would ever come into play at any time during the rest of my life. The answer is yes, if you care about the history of the Indian people. If not, you will encounter a need to know the five civilized tribes of Oklahoma only at the million dollar level on a TV quiz show.



Many thousands died on the death-march "Trail of Tears."

This "civilized" status was conferred upon these five tribes by the European settlers during the colonial and early federal period because they had generally good relations with the colonists and were fairly quick to adopt their customs. The Cherokee, for example, were the first native people to have a written alphabet. The five civilized tribes were rewarded for their cooperation by being betrayed and forcibly removed by the civilized President Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, supported by civilized white settlers who lusted after the Indian lands.

The Indian Removal Act, put more than a hundred thousand people on a thousand-mile death march from the Carolinas and Georgia, all the way to northeastern Oklahoma. More than a third died on the "Trail of Tears," from starvation and disease.

The Cherokee Nation occupies the northeastern part of Oklahoma. My mother Margaret Blanche Brown was born and raised on a farm there, from whose front drive we could spit and almost hit Grand Lake of the Cherokees.

Mom was a redhead but nonetheless a quarter Cherokee, which makes me a more diluted one of those.



Dr. Earl Old Person

At the Cherokee headwaters of my lineage stood great-granny, described by my grandmother as a small darkish woman who was in the Oklahoma Land Run in 1889 with her big Irish husband. She died long before I was born and all I've ever heard about her from the elders is that she had an inability to suffer being jerked around by people and had an explosive temper that started as many fights as it won.

But hey, you can't please everyone.

I was from Oklahoma before it was cool. However, the Indian blood in me has been watered down by the Irish ancestry to the point where there is nothing recognizably Indian about me at all.

Regarding the word "Indian" (others prefer "Native American"), I was in Montana, on the Blackfeet Reservation a few years ago. Dr. Earl Old Person, then chief of the Blackfeet nation in Browning, was reminding me that his ancestors came to be called "Indians" because Christopher Columbus was looking for India, and thought he had found it when he landed in the Bahamas.

With great comedic timing, Dr. Old Person let the thought settle in my mind before adding, "I'm just grateful he wasn't looking for Turkey."