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THE
HAPPY
WOMEN

TRAIL OF TRIUMPH

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ilma Mankiller says her job is "like running a tiny country," which is both true and achingly understated. Her tiny country was rounded up 150 years ago this spring in the hills of Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas and force-marched 1,200 miles west to northeast Oklahoma by the administration of Andrew Jackson, who at the time was running his own tiny country. It wasn't the deal of the century. Jackson's country, the United States, not only cheated Mankiller's, the Tsa-La-

HOW WILMA MANKILLER SURVIVED A LIFE OF OBSTACLES TO BECOME THE FIRST WOMAN CHIEF OF THE CHEROKEE NATION.

Gi, or Cherokee Nation, out of millions of acres of land, it decimated approximately 18,000 men, women and children. Decimated is the wrong term — it means only one in 10. A quarter of the Cherokees died en route of exposure, starvation or execution. ♪ The Trail of Tears (1838-1839) exodus might've been the end of a truly tiny country, but the Cherokee Nation, one of the Five Civilized Tribes of the eastern Americas (also Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles) proved itself large. From its new western home at the edge of the U.S. frontier, the displaced tribe brushed aside self-pity and created a society distinguished by schools, newspapers and commerce that were the envy of the white settlements all around. Headquartered in the new tribal capital of Tahlequah ("two is enough" in Cherokee, a reference to selection of the site by two scouts waiting for a third), the time was known as the tribe's Golden Age. It augured a fine future. ♪ Then came the Civil War. ♪ The tiny country again found itself amidst the turmoil of the country — no longer so tiny — that had mushroomed around it. The bitter conflict fractured the tribe as much as it did the United States. Cherokees allied with North and South at various times. Although the great Chief John Ross saw a Union alliance as wiser, his old rival Stand Watie was the last Confederate general to surrender. After the Civil War, the tribe was treated as though it had lost. Then came the western land rush of the late 19th century, which devoured Cherokee holdings and, farther to the west, saw the routing of the Plains and Pacific Coast Indians. In

BY ROD DAVIS







1907, the Indian Territory that was promised to the Cherokees was incorporated into the state of Oklahoma. The Nation was formally abolished and its lands parceled to individual Cherokees, placed in federal trust or sold to outsiders. The Nation became a memory; the great office of chief came not from ancient tribal councils but by appointment of the U.S. president.

Not until 1971 was the Nation reimplemented under federal self-determination legislation. No longer possessed of a reservation, it was given a 7,000-square-mile jurisdictional area roughly encompassing a 14-county area around Tahlequah, where about half the tribal members (now totaling approximately 78,000) lived, mostly in poverty. The new Nation was able to assert ownership of about 60,000 acres

of its original claim, plus a 96-mile segment of the Arkansas River. The Nation had two major functions: to develop jobs and industries for Cherokees and to administer various social services, including health, basic nutrition, job training and education (judicial services reside with the state).

W. W. Keeler, chairman of Phillips Petroleum, was the last appointed chief, and after helping set up the new Nation, was the first elected chief. Then came Ross Swimmer, who implemented the new tribal constitution in 1976 and who went to Washington in 1985 to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He left his deputy chief, a bright, dedicated organizer named Wilma Mankiller (the name comes from an old tribal warrior title), in charge. She completed the last two years of

Mr. Swimmer's four-year term and stood for election in her own right. It was a bitter, close race, traditionalist versus progressive. It was also about whether the Cherokees would join the 8.5 percent of the 504 U.S. tribes (not counting Democrats and Republicans) with a female leader. They did. On August 14, 1987, Wilma Mankiller became the first woman principal chief in Cherokee history.

She's usually up by 6, and the phone calls don't wait. Today at 6:30 a man facing eviction wants to know what the chief can do about it. She counsels him as best she can. She figures it's a big part of her job. "People should feel free to call or drop by," she says. "It's better to have

people talking to you than to feel isolated. Sometimes you're wrong and sometimes they are, but you don't know if you don't check it out."

This morning she's pressed for time, so her husband, Charlie Soap, a handsome, bilingual full-blood who sets up community self-help programs, drives her from their home near Stillwell to the airport at Tahlequah, where the tribe's twin-engine plane waits. Ms. Mankiller must be in Oklahoma City by midmorning for a meeting with a council of elite business, economic and educational planners seeking to bring more industry to the state.

The plane ride is swift, but her ears are slightly blocked; it's not comfortable. The meeting is long and tedious, but it includes movers and shakers. Chief Mankiller sits attentively but quietly, a long, earth-tone scarf draped around her cream-colored dress. It is important for her to be there and it is important for them that she is. It seems a long way from the Trail of Tears. Except that Wilma Mankiller just got off it.

In 1957, when she was 11, the Bureau of Indian Affairs thought it would be a good idea to transplant native Americans from lives of rural poverty into the open arms of the big cities. They leaned on Wilma's father, Charlie Mankiller, an Indian rights activist. It would be a great opportunity: more jobs, better housing, a shot at the American Dream. A sales pitch, not U.S. cavalry, prompted the relocation, but the exodus begun in 1838 now extended for the Mankiller family to the other end of the continent.

"We went from living in a place with no phone, no TV, no plumbing to downtown San Francisco two days later," Ms. Mankiller recalls. "We didn't know what to expect. No idea at all."

Charlie Mankiller got a job working the docks and warehouses. Irene, Wilma's non-Indian mother, bore 11 children, and to make ends meet the eldest son quit school. They lived in Hudson Point, a tough area. From a



Chief Wilma Mankiller joins in a peace-pipe ceremony following a 1986 meeting in North Carolina. Above: Distribution of flour to Cherokees circa 1871 in former Indian Territory (Oklahoma).

place where, even in poverty, the family had the support of tribal members all around, they had contact with exactly one other Cherokee family. They were refugees. The '60s caught Wilma Mankiller at San Francisco State, a campus of considerable turbulence. She studied sociology and community development and got married and had two daughters. "I was a housewife," she remembers, "and then I went to the occupation of Alcatraz." That was in 1969, when members of the American Indian Movement took over the former prison to dramatize the problems of the country's nearly forgotten aboriginal inhabitants. The event was Ms. Mankiller's political awakening, she says. Housewifery was over. The long trail was turning back on itself.

In 1976, she returned with her daughters to Oklahoma, where her father was now buried and Irene lived, and took a development job for the new Nation. From her successes in delivering the fundamentals of life came her eventual electoral support. Not that she imagined or wished ever to become chief. Not that she imagined

things would get considerably worse in the meantime.

At last the Oklahoma City meeting breaks up. It's past noon, and normally Chief Mankiller would use the time for swimming. She's on a regular exercise program and has to lose 35 pounds, doctor's orders. She's a large woman anyway, but the extra weight puts too much strain on her right leg, which already makes her limp going down stairs and up into the plane at the airport. But she doesn't complain. Even with 17 operations, a limp is better than the alternative.

In 1979, after three years of helping to procure grants and to initiate much-needed rural services, Wilma Mankiller decided to take graduate classes at the nearby University of Arkansas. One fall day — Nov. 9 — she was returning home on state Highway 100. She had a date and looked forward to relaxing after a busy week.

Sherry Morris, her best friend and a former Miss Mississippi, also was driving Highway 100, heading out of Tahlequah. There was a line of cars, and she decided to pass. Directly into Wilma Mankiller's station wagon.

"I didn't know what happened for three weeks," Ms. Mankiller recalls, her expression impenetrable. "People would come into my room at the hospital and I'd ask what happened to the other driver. I guess I just blanked that part out. Even now I can't tell you what happened. It's what other people have said. But one day Sherry's husband was visiting and he told me."

Sherry was killed at the scene. Wilma's legs were shattered, her ribs broken, her face crushed. She was in the hospital for months. Plastic surgeons worked on her face, and the series of operations began on her right leg. "At one point they thought I wouldn't walk," she says. "They even

considered an amputation." She called friends all over the country and finally found a surgeon in Houston who could give her mobility.

As she recovered from the accident, Ms. Mankiller noticed another problem. She had begun to stumble, to drop things, lose control of her muscles. "At first, I thought it was from the accident," she says. "I kept going to the doctor and saying, 'Something's wrong with me.'

"Then one day I was watching a muscular dystrophy telethon. A woman was describing the symptoms and I thought, 'That's what I have.' I called the telethon and talked to someone. It turned out I had myasthenia gravis [a disease involving faulty nerve control]."

In November 1980, she underwent chest surgery to repair muscle and nerve damage. By then she was "totally dysfunctional. My head wouldn't hold up. My eyes didn't work right." The operation helped, and was supplemented by an intensive program of chemotherapy. The drugs had a number of side effects, including a significant weight gain, and she didn't get off them until December 1986. But she kicked the disease. "I was very angry at being sick," she says. "I'd been in this accident. I was mad and now [with the illness] I was angry. I really think anger helped me."

By December 1980, barely out of the hospital, Wilma Mankiller was back on the job. In 1981, she helped secure a grant for a model self-help program for rural Cherokees that enabled a community in Bell, Oklahoma, to build its own 26-mile waterline. By 1983, she was being asked by Ross Swimmer to run as deputy chief. In 1985, she was pushed to the top. "The day Ross told me he was going to take the job [at the BIA] I was stunned," Ms. Mankiller says. "It meant I was principal chief. I didn't want it. It would change my whole life." She decided to go swimming and think it over. She swam a long time. Then she said she'd do it. A year later she married her long-time friend, Charlie Soap, and a year after that she emerged victorious from a tough election and runoff. In her spare time, she became a member of the board of the Ms. Foundation for Women, the Rainbow Television



Workshop. Oklahoma State Chamber of Commerce, the Council of Energy Resource Tribes — and 13 other business or developmental organizations. She became a grandmother in 1984. Last November, she turned 42. It had been 30 years since the one-way ticket to San Francisco.

"At first it was a hard thing to grapple with," the chief of the Cherokee Nation reflects. "I had questions like 'Why is this happening to me?' But now I have to say I don't consider it all a totally bad experience. I came out with a much greater understanding of what I wanted to do with my life. Having survived all that, I knew I could survive anything. Any other problems are minor.

"In the old days they called it 'having a good mind.' It means to think positive. There's a complex way we teach our people to have a positive mind. As individual characters or as a tribe as a whole we have faced adversity in a positive way. You take what's done and turn it in a better path."

The plane returns to Tahlequah by 2 p.m. Chief Mankiller will be slightly late getting to a board meeting of the Cherokee National Historical Society at the Heritage Center, set amid beautifully wooded grounds near the Nation headquarters. The center contains the Cherokee Museum, with exhibits depicting the history of the tribe from its pre-colonial era through the Indian holocaust to the resurgence of the

Artist Robert Lindneux's depiction of the 1,200 mile Trail of Tears, on which a quarter of the Cherokees died.

post-'71 reorganization. The tribal newspaper, in English and Cherokee (an 82-character syllabary was devised in the early 19th century by Sequoyah) is but one of many reminders that the Eastern tribes were as cultured as the British, French and Spanish who destroyed them.

They just didn't have guns. The name of the newspaper was *The Phoenix* (now *Advocate*), a bird that, in myth, rose from its own ashes to fly again.

The meeting is another long one, in the way of meetings, but

such is the stuff of real life governance. The Heritage Center attractions, especially the Trail of Tears amphitheater drama, are important to the tribe symbolically, but are financially problematic. Ms. Mankiller would like to see the grant-funded center become a revenue source — pay its own way and then some. Not everyone on the board agrees, but the chief's views are influential. When it is announced that the tribe will give \$100,000 to the center for the next year, Ms. Mankiller clarifies that the money is not to be used for salaries. The center must find ways to bring in more visitors and meet its own operating costs.

The stipulation is characteristic of the Mankiller approach: self-sufficiency, adaptation, forward movement. These also are elements of military strategy, or social struggle — what you'd expect from a chieftain. They are straight out of her life.

"As a result of my experience, I came to the conclusion that everyday Indians and poor people have a lot more to contribute than they're ever going to have the opportunity to materialize. I wanted to really try to get people to be involved in articulating their own visions. I see a lot of beauty and intelligence and sharing in our communities. I would like to build on that."

She is doing so. The Nation's annual budget for 1986 was \$48 million, of which 47 percent came from government grants or contracts and 41 per-

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THE JOURNEY HOME

element — much to the concern of the oldsters. Eventually, economic reality set in and most of the hipsters moved on, leaving the town once again to the relentless encroachment of tumbleweeds and adobe dust. Ironically, the few who stayed became imbued with the old community spirit and developed into a new entrepreneurial class by tapping into the only abundant local resource — old age. Once so vilified by the old-timers, these new entre-

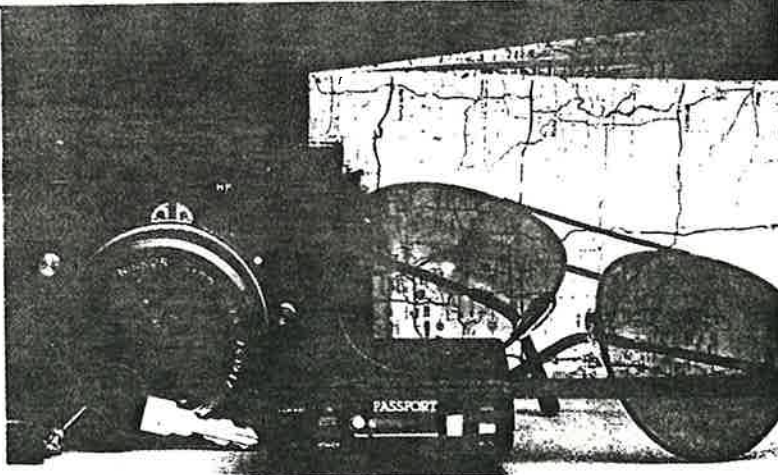
preneurs became their caretakers, building nursing homes, food centers and subsidized housing. The town didn't thrive, but at the very least these people re-established a nucleus of a community.

The town's few remaining founding fathers, as always, have circled their wagons and looked to themselves for support. Like a body that has lost a limb or an organ, they have developed compensatory structures and func-

tions: The sighted lead the blind, the ambulatory shop for the homebound. They have a heightened awareness of others' needs and limitations, including a strongly held respect for freedom and self-sufficiency.

Standing on the rim of the Black Canyon, I wonder if this spectacular setting and its contrastingly harsh land didn't foster a special spirit of cohesiveness. Well, at any rate, in this place my explorations have brought me full circle. My reasons for returning are very clear to me. □

Richard Davis is an assistant airport operations manager in Denver and a professional skier.



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TRAIL OF TRIUMPH

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cent from tribal-generated sales revenues. Ms. Mankiller would like to increase the private sector percentage. With considerable historical justification, she is skeptical about dependence on federal funding. Not only is the tribe in litigation over millions of dollars in past claims, but Reagan-era budget cuts have severely affected the nation's ability to provide services to its most needy members. Repairs to substandard housing — no heat or plumbing, leaking roofs, no electricity, etc. — are so underfunded it would take 18 years at the current rate to meet the existing waiting list of 300 homes. Unemployment among Oklahoma Cherokees, not an oil-rich tribe, contrary to some myths, is approximately 15 percent, double that of non-Indians. Per capita Indian income is about \$4,300, low even compared with the state-wide level of \$6,500.

Nonetheless, the Cherokees are better off than some other tribes, such as the Sioux, where unemployment in the Dakotas can run more than 80 percent. Ms. Mankiller's trips to Oklahoma City meetings help bring in new jobs, and Cherokee Nation Industries, the tribally owned multi-enterprise corporation, has evolved from a loser with sales of \$1.9 million in 1978 to a winner this year with estimated sales of \$20 million, earning projected profits of \$2.5 million. So successful is CNI that the chief tried to talk the tribe into allowing the company to go public. That plan is on hold. There are still deep