



Wilma Mankiller

former Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma

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“Our people arrived here with everything in disarray; many people dead, everything familiar gone. And what is absolutely remarkable about Cherokee people is they almost immediately began to reform the Cherokee Nation and rebuild families, rebuild our communities, and rebuild a nation. It is absolutely amazing that they were able to do that, given what had just occurred.”

— Wilma Mankiller, interview, about the Cherokee rebuilding their nation.

DVD Chapters

Chapter 1: Loss of Land & Rights

*The Cherokee People
The Cherokee Nation Rebuilds Itself after Repeated
Injustices and Assaults*

Chapter 2: The Mankiller Family

*Life As a Child at Mankiller Flats: Family, Community,
and Connection to the Land
The Family Relocates to San Francisco in the 1950s*

Chapter 3: Social Activism

*Mankiller Learns Social Issues from Family: Seeds of
Activism
The Family Lives at Hunter's Point in an African-
American Community
Mankiller Discovers New Strengths in the Women's
Movement
Mankiller Cultivates Leadership Skills Directing a
Youth Center In Oakland, Attending San Francisco
State University, and Working in a Native American
Resource Center
Mankiller Works with the Pit River Tribe in Northern
California*

Chapter 4: Parenthood and Social Action

*Mankiller Balances Life as a Single Mother, Student,
and Activist
In the mid 1970s Mankiller Returns to Oklahoma*

Chapter 5: Cherokee Nation Work

*Mankiller Begins Work for the Cherokee Nation
Chief Ross Swimmer Moves Mankiller to Tribal
Headquarters
Cherokees in Small Communities*

Chapter 6: Life Transformed

*Mankiller's Life Is Transformed by a Series of Events
Beginning In 1979
In a Head-on Collision with a Car Drive by a Friend,
Mankiller Survives but Her Friend Does Not*

Chapter 7: Bell Community Project

*Mankiller and Charlie Soap Organize the Bell
Community Project*

Chapter 8: Entering Politics

Chief Ross Simmer Asks Mankiller to Testify before

Congress for Him

*Chief Swimmer Asks Mankiller to Run as His Deputy
Chief*

*Mankiller Deals with Hostility and Resistance during
Her Campaign*

Chapter 9: Deputy Chief/Chief

*As Deputy Chief, Mankiller Heads Tribal Council
Mankiller Runs for Chief with the Enthusiastic Support
of Her Husband and Family
Her Priorities as Chief*

Chapter 10: Tribal Cooperation

Relationships with Other Tribes

Chapter 11: Environment

Cherokee Lands and the Environment

Chapter 12: Justice & Organizing

*During His Lifetime, the Great Chief John Ross Revered
the Judicial System of the United States. Mankiller
Comments on the System Today
What Progressive People Can Learn from Opposing
Forces*

Chapter 13: Connecting Our World

*Interdependence and Our Responsibility to the Earth
Major Challenges for Tribes Today
The Prophecy of Charlie and the Two Wolves*



Overview

Wilma Mankiller, born in Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 1945, is the first woman to be elected chief of the Oklahoma Cherokee Nation. Her life tracks the tribe's own story: as a child, she and her family moved to an urban setting in response to a government relocation policy, just as the Cherokee tribe itself was removed by the U.S. government from its original homelands in the East and Southeast and relocated to Oklahoma Territory. As a young mother, Wilma became involved in community organizing and advocacy, learning quickly about program management, economic development and grass roots self-development. Returning to Oklahoma where her children could connect to their roots, she quickly became noticed by tribal chief, Ross Swimmer, who asked her to run for deputy chief. Two years later, she became Chief Swimmer's replacement when he went to Washington, D.C. to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Following this term of office, in 1987 she was elected chief in her own right. When she ran again in 1991, the result was a landslide victory. Despite several brushes with tragedy and health problems, this highly respected tribal leader continues to work for her people. She has received many awards and much recognition for her work on behalf of tribes and other U.S. citizens.

THEMES

- Removal/Relocation: Response of Cherokee Nation to U.S. Treaty and policies, the impact of the Relocation Program
- The Power of Community and Cultural Traditions in Individual and Tribal Survival
- Activism to Leadership
- Women as Leaders

VOCABULARY AND TERMINOLOGY

Suggested uses: look up definitions, find synonyms and antonyms, use as key terms for further online study, use words in context, use in written assignments in this series. (These will be defined for the instructor.)

activism *n.* the doctrine or policy of taking positive, direct action to achieve an end, esp. a political or social end

alienation *n.* separation, estrangement, or detachment

barter *vi.* to trade or exchange goods or services without using money

cede *vt.* to give up one's right in; surrender formally

dispossess *vt.* to deprive of the possessions of something, esp. land, a house, etc.; oust

interdependence *n.* dependence on each other or one another; mutual dependence

medicine *n.* among North American peoples
a) any object, spell, rite, etc. supposed to have natural or supernatural powers as a remedy, preventive, protections etc. *b)* magical power

reconcile *vt.* to make friendly again or win over to a friendly attitude

self-sufficiency *n.* having the necessary resources to get along without help; independence

tenure *n.* the act or right of holding property, an office, or a position; the length of time, or the conditions under which, something is held

unilateral *adj.* of, occurring on, or affecting one side only

— *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*



Terminology

Alcatraz Occupation Activist tribal members occupied Alcatraz Island in 1969-71, helping bring public attention to the conditions of contemporary Indians.

Black Panther Party Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the revolutionary Black, nationalist organization was formed in the late 1960s and grew to national prominence. It was highly infiltrated by the FBI. The Black Panthers established free breakfast programs for children.

Boarding School In the late 1800s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs developed a system of boarding schools that were intended to “civilize” Indian children and youth. Thousands were taken from their homes. Many children suffered from being away from families and familiar ways of life. Many also thrived, in spite of the hardships.

Concentration camps A concentration camp is a detention center for a specified group: religious, ethnic, political, citizens of a war zone. In 1838 when President Van Buren ordered the Army to implement the Removal Policy, the Cherokee people were rounded up and put in concentration camps before they were forced to walk to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Though these camps were not specifically for extermination, many Cherokees did not survive them, nor the forced march that followed.

Indian Removal Act of 1830 Indian Removal to west of the Mississippi became the official federal policy when Congress enacted the Removal Act of May 28, 1830, and called for relocation of eastern Indians.

Indigenous peoples The term refers to groups of people who were living on their lands before settlers came from elsewhere. In modern times they are the descendants of people who inhabited a region before people of other cultures and origins arrived, often as occupiers or conquerors. Many indigenous people still struggle to preserve their legal rights and identities.

Relocation Program In the 1950s the Bureau of Indian Affairs worked to relocate Indians to big cities so the federal responsibility to the Indians could be ended. Relocation was put in place during the Termination Era.

Sovereign entity A body of people or a nation with supreme authority. Federally-recognized Indian tribes have the right to self-determination and self-government—they are “sovereign.” Tribes are not foreign nations, however, but “denominated, domestic, dependent nations.” (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 1831).

Trail of Tears There were numerous trails of tears, or trails where Native people cried, in the 1800s. The most well-known is the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Cherokee Indians were forced to travel almost 1,300 miles without sufficient water, food and medicine. Many did not survive.



LESSON ONE: GETTING ACQUAINTED

View Chapter 1

Objectives:

- Students will be able to make a personal connection with the speaker and be open to her remarks.
- Students will be able to discuss family names of Indian people in a judgment-free setting.

Exercises:

1. Within the first minutes of the video, the origin of Wilma Mankiller's surname is discussed. Ask students if they have ever heard of the term "lady-killer," and explain if they have not. Ask if it has the same meaning as Wilma's family name as she describes it. (In her tribe, Mankiller was the same as "warrior" or "guard.") Discuss whether having a name such as Mankiller would be difficult by asking what came to their mind when they first heard the word Mankiller. (At page 13, Wilma states: "And we had the name of

Mankiller. Children can be very cruel."
What do you think she meant?)

2. Ask students to talk to their parents/family about the origin of their own names and report the next day on what their names mean, or how they received them.

Suggested Assessments:

(analytical:○, and reflective:□)

- Students can articulate a description of how one family surname has meaning to a tribal community.
- Students can describe the commonality and differences in the origin of family names.



LESSON 2: RELOCATION

View Chapters 3 and 4

Objectives:

- Students will appreciate the stamina and leadership in the Cherokee people as they survived many forced adaptations.
- Students will be able to contrast the urban and rural environments through which the Mankiller family lived.

Exercises:

1. Have students role play, one representing a well-meaning employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the other Wilma Mankiller's father. The conversation will be about the positive and negative elements of the possible "relocation" from rural Oklahoma to an urban area.
2. Ask students to imagine an abrupt move into an unfamiliar city with customs that are strange and alien. What would their options be? Would they look for people of kindred spirit as soon as possible? Would

they go out of their way to study the customs as soon as possible?

Suggested Assessment:

The Cherokee people rebuilt their society after removal, and many people like Wilma Mankiller restored ties with Oklahoma and their Cherokee heritage following relocation. Ask students to describe traits and values that they believe give people the strength to rebuild following a major disruption.



LESSON 3: LEADERSHIP

View Chapters 3 through 9

Objectives:

- Students will be able to differentiate between activists and leaders.
- Students will reflect on their own motivation and potential for working for social change.
- Students will hypothesize about what might lead an activist to become a leader.

Exercises:

1. Talk to the students about the leaders of the Cherokee Nation they learned about in the video. Ask them what they heard about Wilma's life that led her to become a leader of her people. Ask students to tell you what they believe a person who will be a leader must learn, or who they can learn from, to be able to lead. Wilma states that Chief Swimmer had more faith in her than she did in herself. Ask them why they think he believed in her?
2. Next ask the students to come up with a definition of activist; talk about what Wilma saw around her that inspired her to become an activist.

Suggested Assessments:

(analytical: ○, and reflective: □)

- Students will list the traits of an activist and a leader; they will then respond to the following questions:
 - ① What traits are similar and what traits are different?
 - ② Does a good activist always make a good leader?
 - ③ Is a good leader always an activist?
 - ④ Do you think that all struggles require similar skills and strategies to overcome them? If so, what are some of the strategies? If not, how do different struggles require different strategies?
- Students will write a short essay responding to either of the sets of questions that follow:
 - ① What types of issues or events might inspire them to become active? They should include a description of strategies they think are required for meeting their goals.
 - ② What sorts of leadership positions are required in meeting their goals?
 - ③ What might propel them into becoming more active in leadership?



LESSON 4: RESPONSIBILITY TO EACH OTHER AND OUR EARTH

View Chapter 13

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to explain the importance of maintaining community and a connection to our environment.
2. Students will reflect on social or environmental conditions on which they might act.

Exercises:

1. *Teacher:* “An important message from Wilma Mankiller’s story is our need to be engaged with other people and the land. As we watch this part of the interview, I want you to write down five different ways she suggests will help us become more engaged with each other and the land.” Student responses might include:

- Participate in indigenous ceremonies
- Reject media messages of thinking only and doing for yourself, and remember we have a responsibility to each other and the land
- Maintain traditional medicines and ceremonies
- Remember your history and language
- Remember your culture through the stories of your people.

Discuss student answers as a class. Ask students to give specific examples. Are these strategies currently happening? What could the community do to improve in these areas?

Which of these activities have students engaged in previously?

View Chapter 6, Life Transformed

2. *Teacher:* “Wilma Mankiller experienced a life altering event as a result of surviving a near fatal automobile accident. As a result, she became less fearful of ‘death and life’ and experienced an increased resolve to help her people and the land. Previously, Wilma explained that tribes face a daunting set of health, education, housing, and economic problems. As we hear of Wilma’s own tale of transformation, think about how adversity in your life has in some ways made you a stronger person. Perhaps you have members of your family or friends who have made it through difficult times or have overcome obstacles to achieve success.”

Teacher: “One of the benefits of learning from others is that we can often gain the wisdom of an event without having to experience first hand the adverse situation. Wilma did survive the ordeal, and faced the daunting tasks of improving her community with a newly found sense of courage.”

Reflect on the challenges or adversity in your life or in the lives of people you know. How have you or they “turned lemons into lemonade?”



LESSON 5: TRIBAL RESILIENCY AND THE ROLE OF TRADITION

View Chapters 1, 2, 7 and 13

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to explain the importance of tradition in Wilma Mankiller's life.
2. Students will explore the role of tradition within their own lives.

Exercises:

1. The following is a section from Mankiller's autobiography where she talks about owls. Read this, recall her story about owls from the video, and reflect on the symbolic role of animals in various situations and traditions. What animals have played special roles in your personal, family, or community life?

"Some Cherokees are taught to beware of owls. We were told that a *dedonsek*, 'One who makes bad medicine,' could change into an owl and travel through the night skies to visit Cherokee homes. That usually brought bad luck. I had heard stories that if owls came close to a house, it often meant bad news was coming. Just the hooting of

an owl could make some people wary. In eastern Oklahoma, there are still tales of Estekene, the Owl, who can change shape to appear in almost any form. Other native peoples also consider the owl to be a powerful figure of death in their tribal legends. They throw rocks and sticks at owls that gather near their homes."

—*A Chief and Her People*, p. 221

2. Concluding Quote:

"We are a revitalized tribe. After every major upheaval, we have been able to gather together as a people and rebuild a community and a government. Individually and collectively, Cherokee possess an extraordinary ability to face down adversity and continue moving forward. We are able to do that because our culture, though certainly diminished, has sustained us since time immemorial."

—*A Chief and Her People*, p. 19

Ask students what they think Wilma means when she states that her "culture is diminished."



Suggested Assessments:

(analytical:○, and reflective:□)

- Ask students to write a short paper using one of Mankiller's quotes to explain the role of tradition within the Cherokee world:
- ❶ "The people who got more services were the one's who could work the system. ... the other people were not getting served."
 - ❷ "I entered the Cherokee world. I didn't feel whole without it."
 - ❸ "It is very hard to see the future with tears in your eyes." Mohawk saying
 - ❹ "Life is not worth living unless you are engaged in ... community around you... and land."
 - ❺ "How do we hold onto a sense of who we are as Cherokee people and still interact with the people around us?"
- Why do you think traditional Cherokee communities and individuals were not receiving the benefits of services that more modern (and mixed blood) individuals and communities were receiving?
- What traditions have influenced your own life?
- How have your cultural and family traditions influenced how you see the world?
- How can you remain true to your traditions while at the same time live in a modern world?



*Additional study opportunities and explorations.
Can be used either by class or individual students.*

THE TRAIL OF TEARS

View Chapters 1 and 2

Objectives:

- Students will be able to understand that there are different ways for governments to be organized and to hold power.
- Students will be able to understand the act of treaty-making, particularly the impact of same upon the Cherokee.
- Students will be able to explain the impact of the Trail of Tears on the Cherokee people.

Exercises:

1. With a map of the United States, show students the boundaries of the original Cherokee territory (North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, parts of Alabama and Virginia, and the whole Southeast) where approximately 30,000 Cherokee lived. Ask them to think about how the people lived in this vast area of land without money (fishing, hunting, trapping, farming), and why the new United States government would want this land, especially after gold was found in Georgia.

2. Explain how treaties were made by the United States with other nations, and point out that two nations can have different ways of governing. Discuss the Treaty of Echota made with the Cherokee to move them to Indian Territory in Oklahoma in exchange for their land. Use the handout, The ABC's of Treaties, asking students first if they understand such words as "contract." Ask them to describe the major points and responsibilities of governments entering into a treaty with one another.

3. Show students the Trail of Tears route on a map. Ask the students how Oklahoma might be different from the Southeast? Discuss some of the major struggles that would be facing the tribe in this new land. Ask the students how many of them have moved from one state, or one house, to another. Ask if they can imagine how the Cherokee people must have felt having to leave the only land they had ever known to move somewhere across a great river (the Mississippi).



Suggested assessments:

(analytical: ○, and reflective: □)

- Students can draw a Venne diagram, draw a story poster, or write a story or poem comparing how the Cherokee lived before removal, and after they reached Indian Territory.
- Students can list the differences and similarities between the fledgling U.S. government and the Cherokee Tribe.
- Students can write a “letter to the editor” (or a journal entry) as a non-Cherokee, describing their reaction to Wilma’s statement that a Cherokee Indian saved the life of Andrew Jackson, who later used the Treaty of Echota to seize Cherokee land for non-Cherokees, forcing the Cherokee removal to the West.
- Questions for discussion: The Trail of Tears was experienced by the Cherokee people while relocation was more along the lines of families. Ask students which they think would be harder? Which one would most likely destroy cultural bonds? How are they similar and different?



*Additional study opportunities and explorations.
Can be used either by class or individual students.*

FEMALE CHIEF/WOMEN LEADERS

View Chapters 3, 5, 8 and 9

Objectives:

1. Students will reflect on challenges faced by women in a world where men hold the majority of leadership roles.
2. Students will be able to explain the role of women in leadership around the world.

Exercise:

Students will research famous women leaders and give the class an oral or written report on how this leader became a great leader in a traditionally male-run society? {Suggestions: Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto; Corazon Aquino, Phillipines (1986); Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri; Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India (1966); Kim Campbell, Canada (1993); and Mongolia's first woman president, Suhbaataryn Yanjmaa, (1953).}

Suggested Assessments:

(analytical:○, and reflective:□)

- Students will identify the number of female governors, representatives (63/435), and senators (14/100) in the United States
- Students will think about women leaders they know of within their own communities and families, and consider what obstacles they might have faced in accepting a leadership role.



The following exercise might be appropriate for some classrooms .

A cooperative learning/project-based exercise may be assigning students to groups to research/investigate local community problems, and include opportunities for persons to get involved to help address the problem. Suggested problems/issues areas might include: Homelessness, Hunger
Poverty among the Elderly, etc.

Additional Background Materials:

Books/Documents:

Trail of Tears facts, figures, and map
Relocation facts and figures
A Chief and Her People by Wilma Mankiller

Online Resources:

Cherokee Nation official site:
www.cherokee.org/Culture/Culture.asp

Smithsonian's National Museum of the
American Indian
www.conexus.si.edu/main.htm

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