



Land of the Cherokees

A few days ago, Lola and I traveled through the mountains of North Georgia and East Tennessee – the land the Cherokee Indians once called home. Saturday's sun rose over the Appalachian Mountains, creating an autumn wonderland. Leaving Atlanta, we drove along the Southern Highroads Scenic Highway, through Dahlonega and Blue Ridge, Ga., into Murphy, N.C., and from there to Copperhill, Tenn., along the winding Ocoee River into Cleveland.

Although most people are not aware, there are more native species of hardwood trees in these mountains than anywhere else in North America. As we left the flatland areas of Atlanta and climbed in altitudes, nature put on quite a show. Shimmering in the afternoon sun, the leaves of dogwood, sourwood and blackgum trees had turned deep red. Yellow poplar and hickories had put on bright yellow dresses; red maples added their brilliant reds while sassafras exploded in orange. They blended to form a marvelous patchwork of incomparable artistry.

As we rode along into lush valleys and up curving mountain roads, beside rocky streams and through thick woods, I thought of how the red man – the earliest settler of these parts – must have loved this land, too. In my mind's eye, I saw:

- A young Indian boy practicing with bow and arrow and pausing to admire the newfound flame of the leaves.
- An old man sitting on a log amid colorful trees as he shaped and sharpened arrowheads from stones.
- An Indian woman who had gone to the spring to fetch water, staring into the pool at her own face and the multicolored background fashioned by the treetops high above her head.
- An Indian man, stalking deer, reminded by the leaves that the summer of hunting is about to end, and winter's snares lie ahead.
- An Indian brave and his Cherokee princess, hand in hand, standing on a bluff, silhouetted against a harvest moon that cast an eerie glow across a quilt of colors in the valley far below them.
- A tribal wedding performed in a wooded glen, the striking ceremonial attire vying with the leaves in intensity of brilliance.
- The pledging of love under the spellbinding cover of oak, hickory and ash.
- A year later, the birth of an Indian baby while autumn's leaves fall gently at the doorway.
- And as autumns pass, father and son walking along together in the woods, leaves crunching beneath their feet, as the youngster learns from the elder stories about the origins of the Indian, great feats of bravery and how a boy becomes a man.

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- The tears in the eyes of the Cherokees who were made to leave this beloved land in 1838 – forced on what became known as the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma – to settle on dusty plains where mountains and rocky streams and colorful leaves are only memories.

I saw that in my mind's eye. While saddened at their loss, I rejoiced in the blessing of beauty that once belonged to them, and now found all around me.

--Beecher Hunter