

THE CHEROKEE UNDERSTANDING

One of the distinctives of the City of Cleveland, Tennessee, is that it was the last Eastern capital of the Cherokee Indians. About 12 miles south of Cleveland is a place called Red Clay Springs, and that is where the Cherokee nation, in its council house, conducted negotiations with the federal government in an effort to maintain its lands in the East.

When those negotiations broke down, federal troops arrived, rounded up the Cherokee people, and forced them to go west to Oklahoma in what became known as the Trail of Tears because 4,000 of the 16,000 Indians died along the way. That was a dark period in the history of our country. But here, there is a lot of pride in our Cherokee heritage – and Cherokee bloodlines in many families of this region.

With that background, my attention was captured by an award-winning book, *The Education of Little Tree*, written by Forest Carter, who tells of his life with his Cherokee grandparents. He recalls sitting with his grandfather watching the morning sun rise over a mountain one winter morning. Carter wrote:

We watched the mountain while we ate. The sun hit the top like an explosion, sending showers of glitter and sparkle into the air. The sparkling of the icy trees hurt the eyes to look, and it moved down the mountain like a wave as the sun backed the night shadow down and down. A crow scout sent three hard calls through the air, warning we were there.

And now the mountain popped and gave breathing sighs that sent little puffs of steam into the air. She pinged and murmured as the sun released the trees from their death armor of ice. Grandpa watched, same as me, and listened as the sounds grew with the morning wind that set up a low whistle in the trees. “She’s coming alive,” he said soft and low, without taking his eyes from the mountain.

“Yes sir,” I said, “she’s coming alive.” And I knew right then that me and Grandpa had us an understanding that most folks didn’t know.

Little Tree learned from his Grandpa how to read the signs of nature. Reading signs – not the printed ones we see on our streets and highways, but the signs of nature and life and living – is an art that takes time, practice and patience.

The reward is what Little Tree called “an understanding that most folks don’t know.”

And that understanding includes the power and presence of the God who created the universe and nature and all that is within it as He shares the beauty of His handiwork and whispers His love to us.

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind (Job 12:7-10 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter