



*Episode 4, 2005: Cherokee Bible,  
Austin, Texas*

Gwen: Our first story examines one family's ties to a brutal episode in Native American history. Among the histories of Native American encounters with European settlers, few are as anguished as that of the Cherokee. In the early 1800s, the U.S. Government uprooted virtually the entire nation from their ancestral homelands in the Southern Appalachians and marched them to distant lands in Oklahoma. One in four died. It was called the Trail of Tears. A Cherokee woman from Austin, Texas, has an heirloom which may shed light on this dark chapter in Indian history and reassemble a family saga fragmented for 170 years.

Catherine: My father really never talked about our Cherokee heritage. I've had the Bible all of my life, as far back as I can remember. I've absolutely thought about where the Bible has been and whose hands it has been in and its life and its travels.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I'm catching up with Catherine to hear more about her family and take a look at her Bible. What an amazing script. This is Cherokee, I presume.

Catherine: I think so.

Gwen: Some of these letters look familiar and others are -- are totally strange and fascinating. Oh, there's part of it in English. "New York: American Bible Society, 1860." And this inscription that's handwritten. Have you ever had this translated?

Catherine: I haven't.

Gwen: Well, tell me, Catherine, what exactly would you like to know about this Bible?

Catherine: Well, I'd like to know if this belonged to any of my Cherokee ancestors, and if they came across the country on the Trail of Tears.

Gwen: Well, do you know of any family history from about that time?

Catherine: I have a few names and a few dates and a few places, and the earliest person that we have is a man named Samuel Parks, who was evidently born in 1789 in Tennessee, and he died in Oklahoma.

Gwen: Oklahoma that was then the Indian Territory that was the end of the Trail of Tears, so that could be significant. Well, Catherine, I think I may be able to find out something about your family history and perhaps to tie that to the history of Cherokees in the United States.

Catherine: That would be great.

Gwen: The Trail of Tears is the bleakest chapter in Cherokee history. In 1838, some 16,000 men, women, and children were uprooted from their villages in the Southeast and marched 1,000 grueling miles to the Indian territory of present-day Oklahoma. Some 4,000 died from hunger, exposure, and disease. Catherine's ancestor was born in Tennessee. He would have been 49 at the time of the Trail of Tears, and he died in Oklahoma, so he could have been one of the marchers. I'm meeting John Finger, an historian at the University of Tennessee, to show him our Bible and see if he can provide any insights about Catherine's family history.

John finger: Oh, yes, this is a Cherokee Bible. For one thing, it's written in Cherokee.

Gwen: Well, tell me, when was written Cherokee developed?



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John: It was developed in the early 19th century, we think between about 1809 and 1821, and it was invented by a single individual. His name was Sequoyah, and he had long realized that the ability to read and write gave whites a tremendous advantage over Indians. Here we have an example of the 85 symbols that make up the Cherokee syllabary. Each one represents a certain sound in the language, or a syllable.

Gwen: The syllabary gave the Cherokee a powerful new tool for preserving culture, and literacy rates jumped far beyond their white neighbors in the south. It sounds as if many Cherokee were prospering in the 1820s, and then comes the Trail of Tears and they were moved from their lands. What happens?

John: I think the Cherokees had two major problems: one, they were Indians, and they occupied a vast amount of land in the Southeast that the whites wanted for themselves. And then when gold was discovered in northern Georgia and North Carolina in 1828, that was, in a sense, the straw that broke the camel's back. There was no way that the Indians were going to be able to stay in their homeland.

Gwen: It's fascinating history, but it's not clear that Catherine's Bible can tell me anything about her family. The Trail of Tears was in 1838. Catherine's Bible wasn't published until 1860, 22 years after the trail ended. John tells me that the American Bible Society may have published such texts to "Christianize" Indians who had survived the journey. He suggests I probably ought to go to Oklahoma to learn more. First, however, we need to discover what we can about Catherine's ancestors in Tennessee, where the trail began. My colleague, Elyse Luray, is in the town of Decatur meeting two Cherokee genealogists.

Elyse: Hi.

Shirley Lawrence: Hi.

Elyse: Shirley Lawrence and Doris Trevino of the Tennessee Trail of Tears Association tell me that the forced march left Cherokee families as torn and tattered as Catherine's Bible.

Elyse: Let's get to it.

Shirley: Okay.

Elyse: Samuel Parks is a name that Catherine gave us. I want to see if I can find where the parks family was when the Trail of Tears began. Shirley, what are you looking at?

Shirley: Well, you know, you gave me the name of Samuel Parks and that he was living in Tennessee and the date.

Elyse: Okay.

Shirley: So I have pulled the 1830 Tennessee Census, and I'm hoping to find Samuel and his family. Let's see. And there he is.

Elyse: "Samuel Parks, Monroe County."

Shirley: That's him.

Elyse: Shirley discovers that Samuel was married to a woman named Susan Taylor, and that they had nine children. So we've established that the Parks family is in Tennessee before the Trail of Tears, but can we place

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them in Indian Territory after the Trail of Tears?

Doris Trevino: Well, first we have to find out the children's names.

Elyse: Mm-hmm. Doris has the original handwritten notes from a Cherokee genealogical study called "Leaves from the Family Tree."

Doris: Here you see Susan Taylor and Samuel Parks, and this is a list of their children.

Elyse: Okay, so now we have their names, what's the next step?

Doris: To go to a western census to see if we can find any of those names in Indian Territory.

Elyse: After the Trail of Tears, the government conducted censuses of Cherokee living west of the Mississippi. These Indian Rolls are crucial for reconstructing family histories. Oh, I love some of these names. Jackson Chicken, Polly Coldeater. It's great.

Doris: Oh, here they are. Thomas Jefferson Parks. Let's look on the list.

Elyse: Thomas Jefferson Parks. Thomas Jefferson Parks.

Doris: All right, that's great.

Elyse: Okay, so that tells us that Thomas Jefferson was living in Indian Territory, but it doesn't tell us if he was on the Trail of Tears.

Shirley: No, it doesn't. And that means we've got a lot more work to do.

Elyse: While Doris digs into the records, Shirley takes me to a place where the worst episode in Cherokee history was set in motion. So, Shirley, where are we?

Shirley: We're at Blythe's Ferry Landing. This is the site where more Cherokees were forced west than any other site.

Elyse: In the early winter of 1838, some 9,000 Cherokee began the Trail of Tears here with a treacherous crossing of the Tennessee River. What were the conditions like?

Shirley: They had been in the stockades for 2.5 months under horrible conditions. They were suffering from dysentery, whooping cough, any disease where there's large crowds. By the time they got here, they were just wore out, and yet they had just started their journey.

Elyse: If Samuel Parks crossed this river that terrible winter day, the answer may lie somewhere within these documents.

Gwen: And Catherine's Bible, what can it reveal about her family? Maybe the inscription has a story. To find out, I'm on my way to a place where Cherokee is still a part of everyday life. After many months and a 1,000 grueling miles, this is where the Trail of Tears ended: Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I'm meeting Choogie Kingfisher, the coordinator for the Cultural Resource Center of the Cherokee Nation. I'm hoping he can translate our inscription.



*Episode 4, 2005: Cherokee Bible,  
Austin, Texas*

Choogie Kingfisher: I've brought someone along to help us with the translations. This is Kristin Smith, and she helps develop language material for our immersion classroom.

Kristin Smith: Our first line here says... [speaking Cherokee] It's talking about, "this book is the word of God," in the Cherokee language. It gives an individual's name, perhaps their first and last name. It says... [speaking Cherokee] "I wrote this."

Gwen: Oh, so this is the person's name.

Kristin: Yes, but I'm kind of indefinite on the name here. Reading someone else's handwriting, especially so old, is a little difficult sometimes.

Gwen: Tantalizing, but frustrating. [laughs]

Kristin: Very. I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have given you the name.

Gwen: So we may never know if any of Catherine's ancestors owned this Bible back in 1860. I hope Elyse is having more luck back East.

Elyse: While looking for documents to connect Samuel Parks to the Trail of Tears, Doris makes a very odd discovery.

Doris: Hey, Elyse, look at this. This is a book of surveys done on land grants given to the Cherokees.

Elyse: In 1817, the U.S. Federal Government published a catalog of Cherokee land holdings in Tennessee.

Doris: And here is Samuel Parks.

Elyse: So he was Cherokee.

Doris: Well, that's what I thought, but I'd like for you to look at this appraisal.

Elyse: "Samuel Parks, white man?" Samuel Parks was white?

Doris: That's what it says.

Elyse: Huh, now I don't know what to think. Clearly, white people weren't subject to removal, so it doesn't seem as if Samuel Parks would have ever been on the Trail of Tears. But there's only one way to find out for sure: keep working.

Gwen: I have a hunch about Catherine's Bible that I want to talk over with Choogie Kingfisher. Elyse discovered that Samuel Parks' son, Thomas Jefferson, lived in present-day Oklahoma in 1851, so maybe there's a link between him and our Bible. I'm curious, Choogie. This Bible was published in 1860. That's a good generation after the Trail of Tears. What was life like for the Cherokee in the Indian Territory at that time?

Choogie: During the Trail of Tears, many parents were lost, and when the children got here, they had no parents, no one to take care of them, and so the missionaries came in and they began to set up orphanages and schools. And what they were trying to do is Europeanize them, teaching them how to act American, if you will.

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Gwen: Well, then, this comes back to the fact that the Bible is written in the Cherokee language. What do you make of that?

Choogie: They would use the Bibles as a tool to lure our children in, and they would make them feel comfortable in their surroundings, and then they would begin to reeducate them.

Gwen: Reeducation in adopting western dress and bearing, reading and speaking English became compulsory.

Choogie: The schools were very formal, almost military-like, and anything that was Cherokee was taken away from them, almost beaten out of them. And that continued on into the 20th century, where my mother was beaten for speaking her language in the school system.

Gwen: Well, that's terrible, and it's all too common, I'm afraid. But it helps me understand more about this particular Bible. The missionaries were using the Cherokee language because the children probably didn't speak or read English, and so this was a way to teach them about Christianity. But along with it was a profound disdain for Cherokee culture.

Choogie: Yes, they -- they treated us much like animals, and the Trail of Tears showed that.

Gwen: Does Choogie's account connect Catherine's family to such cruel reeducation? So our Bible could well have been used in one of those missionary schools.

Choogie: Yes, it could have been.

Gwen: Samuel Parks came from Tennessee. Catherine's family grew up in Oklahoma, but were any of her ancestors on the Trail of Tears? It's a tantalizing possibility, and I hear from Elyse that things are coming together in Tennessee.

Elyse: Carlos Wilson, a Cherokee researcher, has spent years investigating the Trail of Tears, and Shirley is consulting some of his documentation.

Shirley: This is a list that came from the National Archives. This is a breakdown of the different groups that went on the Trail of Tears. And if you will, look at group number 11.

Elyse: "Ah, 1,029 persons left by land, 942 arrived." There were 55 deaths, 15 births. They left November 16, 1838, and arrived March 24, 1839. So it took them almost four months. That's a long time.

Shirley: And Richard Taylor was the leader of this group.

Elyse: I remember that Susan Taylor was Samuel Parks' wife. Richard Taylor. So Susan Parks' maiden name was Taylor. Were they related?

Doris: Okay, I can help you with that. This is another page from the Cherokee collection that shows that Samuel Parks, married to Susan Taylor, and Richard Taylor is Susan Taylor's brother.

Elyse: So Richard Taylor is Samuel Parks' brother-in-law.



*Episode 4, 2005: Cherokee Bible,  
Austin, Texas*

Doris: Yes.

Shirley: Yes.

Elyse: And Richard Taylor was a leader on the Trail of Tears.

Shirley & Doris: Yes. Yes.

Elyse: Does that mean that Samuel Parks was on the Trail of Tears?

Gwen: I'm on my way back to see Catherine to tell her what Elyse and I discovered. Well, Catherine, we weren't able to find who owned that Bible.

Catherine: Mm-hmm.

Gwen: But we do have an extraordinary story to tell you about your ancestor, Samuel Parks.

Shirley: This is a list from the National Archives of "individuals that were paid by the Cherokee nation for the positions they held during the Trail of Tears."

Elyse: So, it says, "name, detachment and position." Let's look down to the P's. Ha, there he is, Samuel Parks, teamster. He's a teamster!

Shirley: Yes, he drove a wagon, and they would have carried the sick, the elderly, extremely young, and supplies.

Elyse: So Samuel Parks was definitely on the Trail of Tears.

Shirley: Yes.

Elyse: And he was white, so he went by choice.

Shirley: Yes. Yes.

Elyse: Why would he voluntarily go?

Shirley: Well, he was married to a Cherokee woman, he lived in a Cherokee community, and he probably felt a responsibility to his extended Cherokee family.

Doris: And I think he obviously identified with the Cherokee, so I think he probably just went out of love.

Gwen: What would you say to him if there was some way of -- of reaching that distant relative? What would you -- what would you feel like saying to him?

Catherine: Thank you. Thank you for taking care of all of us. I just wonder how many lives he saved. Just that little sense of connection.

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

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*Episode 4, 2005: Cherokee Bible,  
Austin, Texas*

Catherine: So, that's great.

Gwen: The Trail of Tears could have ended Cherokee culture, but the Cherokee found ways to adapt and even prosper. Once seen as a way of eradicating native culture, Cherokee Bibles helped preserve the language, and the church became a place where their way of life could survive and grow.

Choogie: When we pray, we pray for everyone. That's what it means to be Cherokee.

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