

Chickasaw Migration Legends - The Parting of the Ways by Tom Phillips

Editor's Note: Two years ago, renowned Chickasaw artist Tom Phillips proposed a painting portraying the moment when the life of the Chickasaw Nation began. Last year, Governor Anoatubby accepted the proposal and Phillips, who lives in San Francisco, completed a sketch. After Governor Anoatubby asked a group of tribal members to examine the sketch, a few minor revisions were recommended. Phillips incorporated the revisions into his finished oil painting, which measures fifty-two and a half inches by twenty-three inches. The painting is on display - along with several of the artist's other works - at the Council House Museum in Tishomingo. A photo of most of Phillips painting adorns this issue's cover. The entire work would not fit our cover format; the most significant omission was Phillips's timeline containing pictorial symbols from the tribe's past, which he placed across the bottom of the painting. Photos of segments from the painting accompany Phillips's essay. He entitled his painting: Chickasaw Migration Legends - The Parting of the Ways.

Centuries ago, the ancestors of the present day Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians lived within the Mexican empire but were driven out by a more powerful tribe. For forty-three years the displaced Indians traveled by foot through North America, carrying all their possessions including the bones of their ancestors.

They fished and hunted along the way and stopped at times to plant corn and await the harvest.

These spiritually oriented people navigated by means of a sacred pole which they stuck in the ground at each stopping point: the direction the pole leaned in the morning after it was planted would be the direction they would follow; if the pole stood upright, they would settle.

The Indians were led in their wanderings by twin brothers, Chatah and Chikasih, who wisely led the tribe through many hardships. Some legends tell of a large white dog that served as their guide and scout. After many years the Indians reached an immense body of flowing water that stopped them at first. They named it Misha Sipokni, beyond all age, which was later corrupted by whites to Mississippi.

Next morning, the pole was leaning east, across the great river. It took many weeks to get all ten thousand Indians across by raft and canoe; and then the pole gave them an ambiguous signal: it wobbled crazily before stopping in an upright position. Chatah and many tribes-people believed it meant they should settle right there, but Chikasih and his followers believed it meant they should continue moving east. Chatah and his followers settled in central Mississippi, eventually becoming known as the Choctaw Nation.

Chikasih's band went as far east as Alabama where they established what they believed to be a permanent settlement. However, one morning the pole was leaning to the west so they packed up and moved in that direction, settling in what is now northern Mississippi and becoming known as the Chickasaw Nation. No one knows just when this migration took place. Some authorities believe it may have been around 200 to 400 AD.

In the picture, Chatah is motioning to stay here, while Chikasih motions to keep going. The shaman are chanting and the drummer is beating the sacred drum, while the elders argue over which twin to follow. It is a moment of great significance. Both sides are advancing in their views. The Indians governed by consensus, and had to reach an agreement. This time, they could not, forcing a parting of the ways. Those who favored Chatah stayed right there; those who followed Chikasih went on to found a new nation.

Bibliography:

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