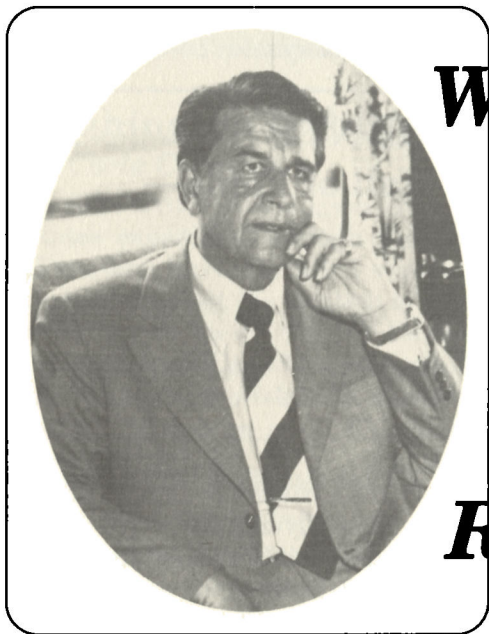


“Let’s Make It Happen”



W.W. Keeler and Cherokee Renewal

By Marjorie J. Lowe

In 1973 *Time* magazine reviewed a Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) report, “The Corporation,” which dealt with W.W. Keeler’s retirement from Phillips Petroleum Company at the age of sixty-five. The reviewer saw Keeler’s portrayal as a chief executive officer (CEO) who was “Tough, quietspoken and by no means an unattractive figure. . . . [Keeler] gives an impression of a spirit deliberately blunted, an intellect deliberately narrowed to achieve his goal.”¹

The CBS documentary and the *Time* review, however, both overlooked the dedicated and determined leadership that Keeler provided the Cherokee Nation for twenty-six years. From 1949 to 1975, William Wayne Keeler, who simultaneously served as chief of the Cherokees and as CEO of Phillips, supplied the direction, inspiration, and financial support necessary for the very survival of Cherokee sovereignty. Through his devotion, the Cherokee Tribe continued the reconstruction and renewal initiated by the preceding chief, J.B. Milam, which prepared it for the challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Keeler laid much of the groundwork upon which chiefs Ross Swimmer, Wilma Mankiller, and others have rebuilt tribal autonomy.

Keeler was born in Dalhart, Texas, on April 5, 1908, to William and Sarah Louisa Carr Keeler. William Keeler was a farmer-stockman who had gone from their home in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, to the Texas Panhandle to buy cattle. Although Mrs. Keeler was expecting their fourth child, she decided to go along. During the trip, she gave birth to their first son. Only two of the five Keeler children survived into adulthood, Blanch Keeler Adams and "Bill," as he came to be called.²

Keeler grew up in Bartlesville and attended the public schools there. While still in high school and later in college, he worked as a part-time summer student on construction sites for Phillips Petroleum Company. He attended the University of Kansas, majoring in chemical engineering, then became a permanent employee of Phillips in 1929 at its refinery in Kansas City, Kansas. In Kansas City he also met and married Ruby Lucille Hamilton on September 15, 1933. Ruby, a Kansas farm girl, was a graduate of the school of nursing at Trinity Lutheran Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri.³

Following their marriage, Keeler worked in Kansas City where two of their three sons, Billy and Brad, were born. In 1939 he transferred to Borger, Texas, as chief chemist in the Phillips Refinery there. In 1941 he returned to Bartlesville where Phillips had its main office. His youngest son, Richard, was born after the family moved back to Oklahoma.⁴

The oil industry began a rapid expansion in the early 1940s and offered many career opportunities for an educated, ambitious young man like Keeler. Still he never forgot his Cherokee background and continually volunteered his services to the Cherokee Nation when or where needed.

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Keeler's parents, both of Cherokee descent, enrolled as original allottees of the Cherokee Nation in 1906, as did his older sister, Blanch, who was born in 1900. Bill Keeler, however, was born too late to be added to the Cherokee Dawes Rolls.⁵

Included on the Keeler-Carr family tree were notable Cherokee leaders such as Richard Fields, the major, diplomatic representative of the Texas Cherokees until his death in 1827, and James Foster, one of the signers of the Treaty of New Echota in 1835.⁶ His great-great-grandparents, William and Nancy Fields Blythe, and great-grandparents, Hilliard and Martha Fields Rogers, removed from Tennessee and Georgia, respectively, on the Trail of Tears in the late 1830s.⁷

Keeler's entrepreneurial white grandfathers, Nelson F. Carr and George B. Keeler, recalled the white traders of Georgia in the early 1800s. Both had Cherokee wives. Upon moving into Indian Territory, Nelson Carr established the first trading post and grist mill from which the city of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, flourished. George Keeler was instrumental in drilling the first commercial oil well in what was to become the state of Oklahoma.⁸ It was that pioneer and Cherokee heritage that fostered Keeler's devotion to the Cherokee people, a commitment never denied.

Keeler served as vice-chairman of the Cherokee National Council at a convention of the tribe at Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in July, 1948. In 1949 President Harry S. Truman appointed him principal chief of the Cherokees to replace the recently deceased chief J.B. Milam. Both the Cherokee National Council and the Oklahoma congressional delegation recommended his appointment.⁹

Milam had formed a tribal organization or executive committee to replace a loosely knit group into which the Cherokees had slipped due to the mandate of the 1906 Five Tribes Act, which had virtually stripped all of the tribes of their effectiveness as governing entities. Keeler continued Milam's committee, which Indian commissioner John R. Nichols and the United States government accepted as a legally constituted body. On December 13, 1949, the executive committee met at the courthouse in Tahlequah with the newly appointed principal chief to define its functions.¹⁰ With the recognition and appointment of Chief Keeler, however, there came no guarantee of a permanent appointment as chief. There also was no tribal council or government structure, and no funds to meet the many needs of the Cherokee people.

For the previous forty-three years, the Five Tribes of Oklahoma had virtually no constitutional authority. Prior to 1949 the president occasionally appointed chiefs for one day only, usually when the federal government wanted to expedite the signing of fee-simple land titles with a particular tribe. Basically, tribal affairs were conducted at the whim of the president currently in office.¹¹

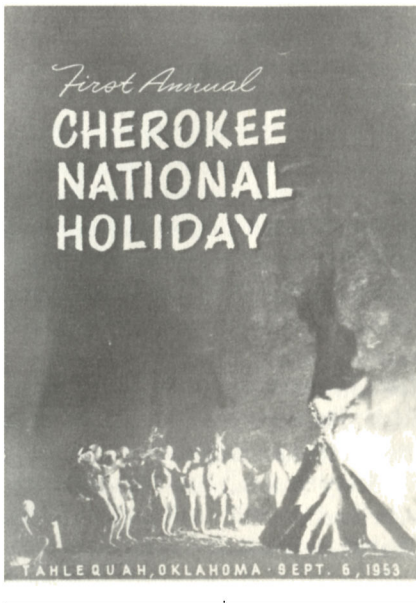
In 1950 in a speech given at the anniversary of the founding of the Cherokee seminaries at Tahlequah, Keeler contended that the government's Indian policy had minimized and suppressed Cherokee culture. He believed the Cherokee Nation had lost almost any distinction as the literate tribe that had excelled in all aspects of a civilized society during the nineteenth century.¹²

One of Keeler's first acts as chief refined the executive committee into a more effective tribal council. He appointed members who would be most representative of the Cherokee citizenry.

In a *Tulsa World* article nearly forty years after Keeler's appointment, reporter Jerry Fink described another of Keeler's most important projects to renew the Cherokee Nation:



Then-governor David Boren (l) and Jimalee Burton joined W.W. Keeler in June, 1975, to break ground during the Trail of Tears special benefit opening at the Cherokee Heritage Center (Photos courtesy Cherokee National Historical Society unless noted).



Keeler's creation of the Cherokee National Holiday in 1953 inspired Cherokees to recall, cherish, and preserve their cultural heritage. The Cherokee National Museum (opposite) and other facilities at the Cherokee Heritage Center receive thousands of visitors each year. The museum underwent major interior renovation in 1995-1996.

In 1952, Chief Keeler used his own money to establish the Cherokee Foundation, a non-profit organization to obtain and administer funds and properties to improve the welfare, culture, health and morale of the Cherokee people; to encourage and assist deserving Cherokees in obtaining higher education through scholarship awards and educational loans; to assure attendance of Cherokee Indian children in elementary and high schools; and to help provide instruction for Cherokees in self-supporting trades.¹³

The Cherokee Foundation provided the framework for more than seventy-five social service programs that are operated by the Cherokee Nation today. One of its first projects provided used clothing and shoes for Cherokee children. The foundation also added other charitable efforts. Believing that young Cherokees should become more aware of their cultural heritage, Keeler established a Cherokee National Holiday to commemorate the Cherokee Constitution enacted on September 6, 1839, after reunification of the tribe following its removal to Indian Territory. The tradition continues today.

Under Keeler's strong leadership, the tribe initiated and carried out a five-point program to revitalize the Cherokee Nation in a relatively short time. For those achievements, Keeler received the



All American Indian Award in 1957. The panel of judges included Dr. Kenneth D. Wells, president of the Freedoms Foundation; Robert G. Simmons, chief justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court; and Charles R. Hays, former chief justice of the South Dakota Supreme Court. In accepting the award, Keeler remarked, "The Cherokees have many qualified men in the tribe who can and must assume the responsibilities of leadership. Members of our Tribal Council are taking an increasing share of these responsibilities, but we need more young leaders to supplement their efforts."¹⁴ He consistently sought young, capable Cherokees to join in the tribe's endeavors.

Under Keeler's influence the tribe and interested individuals organized the Cherokee National Historical Society in 1963, resulting in the creation of Tsa-La-Gi, the Cherokee Nation Heritage Center, on the site of the Cherokee Female Seminary which was destroyed by fire in 1887. Today the center includes an authentic re-creation of an ancient Cherokee village; the theater at Tsa-La-Gi; the Cherokee National Museum; Adams' Corner Rural Village, which was dedicated to Blanch Keeler Adams, Keeler's sister; and the HO-Chee-Nee Trail of Tears Memorial Prayer Chapel.¹⁵ The Cherokee National Archives and Library building is the final remaining structure to be built from the original master

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plan. When completed, it will be a contemporary version of a Cherokee Council House.¹⁶

Under Keeler's leadership, improvements in tribal affairs also advanced at a steady pace. They accelerated in 1964 when the Cherokees successfully settled their claim for compensation for the real value of the Cherokee Outlet land that had been opened to non-Indian settlement in 1893. The settlement brought approximately \$14.7 million to the original allottees or their heirs.¹⁷ While officials performed the legal work required to disburse the payments, the principal earned nearly \$2 million in interest, which the Cherokee Nation designated for programs to benefit the tribe as a whole. Keeler and the executive committee decided to build a restaurant and motel on private land to provide jobs for unemployed Cherokees.¹⁸

The Cherokee Nation hired Ralph F. Keen as general business manager of the tribal office in 1967. A young man with wide experience in the administrative field of Indian affairs, Keen had achieved a reputation for his ability and dedication in advancing the plight of the Indians. As business manager he oversaw the construction of the restaurant and motel, worked to provide jobs for those Cherokees one-quarter blood or more, and assisted in solving the problems of housing and other job opportunities for the Cherokee Nation.

The motel and restaurant formed the beginning of the Cherokee Tribal Complex, four miles southwest of Tahlequah on State Highway 62. The complex consisted of a Cherokee arts and crafts center for tribal members, a service station leased by Phillips Petroleum Company, which returned a portion of the profit to the tribe, and an office building that was leased to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to house its Tahlequah office. Monies earned were held in trust in the First National Bank of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

As chief, Keeler also conducted community meetings, primarily in Baptist churches throughout the Cherokee Nation, to keep the people informed about tribal expenditures. He used the meetings to encourage Cherokee leadership by asking each community to appoint a spokesman to serve as the contact person for Cherokee tribal affairs.¹⁹

After the successful settlement of the Outlet case in 1964, the Cherokee Nation turned to the resolution of another issue known as the Arkansas River bed case. The Cherokees had been given fee-simple title to the land, including the waterways, within the In-

dian Territory as early as 1835. They had never implemented that privilege, but the clause granting it had not been removed from the patent. During Keeler's tenure, the Cherokees began litigation to assert ownership and recover royalties due from sand, gravel, and gas production in the Arkansas River.

With Keeler's full support, Earl Boyd Pierce and Andrew C. Wilcoxson entered suit in December, 1966. The Choctaw and Chickasaw nations intervened in the Cherokee suit and became parties to the judgment in 1967. After adverse decisions by the lower courts, the case went to the United States Supreme Court in 1970. The Court found that the ninety-six mile stretch of the navigable portion of the Arkansas River belonged to the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations. The State of Oklahoma promptly repaid the tribe the \$8 million it had collected from river bed resources. The United States Congress has still not acted to pay its share of the claims.²⁰

As early as 1967, the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma began advocating the election of the principal officers of their nations.

After the opening of the Cherokee Heritage Center, Cherokee artist Willard Stone (r) donated his rendition of a Cherokee stick ball player to Keeler for the Cherokee National Museum collections.



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They believed tribal members should have more voice in their government and lobbied Congress for legislation.²¹ Enacted on October 22, 1970, Public Law 91-495 authorized each of the Five Tribes to select their principal officer by popular vote in accordance with procedures established by the officially recognized tribal spokesman and governing entity.²²

The law set the stage for the first election of the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation since William C. Rogers won election in 1903. Keeler ran on his record of twenty-two years experience as appointed principal chief. (Following his appointment by President Truman, Keeler had been reappointed by Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. The Kennedy appointment had no termination date.) In addition, Keeler noted in his campaign that during his tenure 17,268 Cherokee families had received aid —1,732 by employment and/or loans from tribal funds for a total value of nearly \$2.2 million, 7,205 families by tribal programs amounting to \$6.4 million, and another 8,431 families by service programs. The tribe's net worth had reached \$7.8 million, of which \$5.6 million represented the value of tribal lands, not including the



This school house is one of several buildings at Adams' Corner Rural Village, which was named for and dedicated to W.W. Keeler's sister (Photo by Fred W. Marvel, Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department; used with permission).

Arkansas River bed. Keeler promised to continue devoting his talents and efforts toward more opportunities for Cherokees.²³

Keeler's opponent, Sam Hider, a full blood who spoke both Cherokee and English, ran on the platform that he would be a full-time chief who would put the welfare of the tribe first.²⁴

Keeler's successful record prevailed and on August 14, 1971, he became the first principal chief of the Cherokee Nation to be elected since statehood. In his inaugural address to more than 4,000 Cherokee citizens, he admitted:

[O]ur Cherokee Executive Committee of which I have been a member has been criticized. But I also know that they have given great service to the Cherokees. I want to express my thanks to them for their unselfish assistance to me. Certainly they should be continued until we have had time to rewrite our Cherokee Constitution and make our tribal leaders more responsible to individual Cherokees. I would like to see an executive and a legislative branch based on the pattern of our early-day constitution. The tribal government must reflect the will of all of the people.²⁵

With those words he thus forecasted the rewriting of the Cherokee Constitution, which Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morris Thompson approved for referendum four years later on September 5, 1975. Then-chief Ross O. Swimmer seconded the constitutional act on October 2, followed by approval by tribal vote of about ten to one in 1976. The new constitution provided for legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. Article sixteen of the new constitution stated that it overruled and superseded the provisions of the Cherokee Constitution of 1839.²⁶

Keeler's greatest crisis as elected principal chief occurred when a group of young, discontented Indians challenged him at the Cherokee capital. Following the mood of youthful Americans elsewhere, Cherokee dissidents joined the American Indian Movement to impugn what they viewed as the "Cherokee Establishment." Keeler was foremost among the targets of their animosity. Young Indians carrying guns confronted him about his administration of tribal funds during the dedication and opening of the Tsa-La-Gi Restaurant and Motel on June, 24, 1967. Forewarned about the impending confrontation, Keeler willingly opened the books for the dissidents' inspection and gave them the opportunity to voice their displeasure over the public address system. When they could discover no wrongdoing and decided they had no case, they retreated peacefully.²⁷

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In Tsa-La-Gi Ancient Village, Cherokees demonstrate ancient tribal lifeways in a natural setting. The outdoor drama (upper r) features spiritual native dances to commemorate the Cherokees' suffering on "The Trail Where They Cried." Martin Hagerstrand of Tahlequah, the first executive director of the Cherokee National Historical Society and currently an OHS Board member, worked with Keeler to build the village and theater (Upper left, photo by Fred W. Marvel, Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department; lower photos by Jim Argo; all used with permission).

Following the incident, the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Tribes of Oklahoma issued a press release deploring and condemning the demonstration. The council stated that dissident groups had attempted to cause certain tribal members to lose faith in agencies of service and in fully constituted tribal representatives in their efforts to improve the lives of Indian people. It invited all members of the Five Tribes to express their views on matters affecting them, but encouraged them to refrain from unlawful or unreasonable actions.²⁸

After twenty-six years of service, in 1975 Keeler chose not to run for a second term and backed Ross Swimmer, a capable, young attorney who successfully won his bid for election as principal chief.

When Keeler turned over the office to Swimmer, the Cherokee Nation had achieved popular, judicial, and legal sovereignty. It enjoyed a distinct cultural revival by utilizing government aid to its best advantage while encouraging the private sector to provide on-going sources of employment for tribal members. Swimmer gave much of the credit for the Western Cherokees' resurgence to Keeler. Swimmer observed that Keeler used the same talents he brought to his position as CEO of Phillips Petroleum Company to work for the benefit of the Cherokees during his long tenure as principal chief.²⁹

After enduring a lengthy illness, Keeler died August 24, 1987, at the age of seventy-nine in Bartlesville. He left his devoted wife of fifty-four years, Ruby Hamilton Keeler, three sons—Dr. William Robert Keeler, Bradford Roger Keeler, Kenneth Richard Keeler, and six grandchildren.

Then-chief Wilma P. Mankiller, in paying tribute to Keeler's long years of service to the Cherokee Nation, noted, "The progress and reputation that the Cherokee Nation enjoys today is due in large part to Chief Keeler." Ross Swimmer, who had succeeded Keeler as chief in 1975 and served as director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, said Keeler, in essence, "was the Cherokee tribe. He was the one who established the tribe and he did a lot of it with his own money and energy."³⁰ In 1987 the Cherokee Nation honored him by dedicating and naming the tribal headquarters at Tahlequah the W. W. Keeler Tribal Complex.³¹

In *Cherokee Removal, Before and After*, Rennard and William M. Strickland summarized Keeler's contribution to the Cherokee Nation with the following appraisal:

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Chief Keeler was the most powerful, enigmatic, and controversial Cherokee tribal leader since John Ross. As president and chief executive officer of Phillips Petroleum, Keeler had a significant national power base. He knew how to manipulate the federal structure, and the tribe benefited mightily from his power and position. Nonetheless, many felt he failed to understand the needs of traditional and fullblood Cherokees. Although considerable hostility and agitation marked his final years, there is no question that when Keeler retired as chief, the Cherokee Nation had become a vital force once again.³²

Perhaps the finest tribute came from his son Richard, who wrote, "Dad was like a bright comet, who streaked across the sky and said, 'Come join me, and let's go find out what's happening. If it's not happening, let's make it happen.'"³³ W.W. Keeler did just that.

ENDNOTES

* Marjorie J. Lowe, a registered Cherokee now living in Houston, Texas, was born and reared on her father's allotment near Dewey, Oklahoma. She is a graduate of Oklahoma State University and received the M.Ed. degree from Louisiana State University. She serves as a trustee of the Cherokee National Historical Society, Tahlequah. Her father, Paul Johnson, was W.W. Keeler's first cousin.

¹ Richard Schickel, "CBS Reports: 'The Corporation,'" *Time*, 102 (December 6, 1973): 74.

² Bob Finney, ed., "The (Washington County, Oklahoma, Historical Society) Millstream," 24 (October 16, 1987): 1-2.

³ (Tahlequah, Oklahoma) *Cherokee Advocate*, January, 1993.

⁴ *Bartlesville* (Oklahoma) *Examiner-Enterprise*, August 24, 1987; W.W. Keeler Biography, Phillips Petroleum Company, Archives Department, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

⁵ Dawes Commission Census Cards—William Keeler, #10354; Lula Keeler, #10355; Lela Blanch Keeler, #10356, Oklahoma Historical Society, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma City.

⁶ Jack D. Baker and David Keith Hampton, *Old Cherokee Families, Notes of Dr. Emmett Starr, Volume 3, Ludovic Grant* (Oklahoma City: Baker Publishing Company, 1987): 1, 4, 15, 47, 104-105; Dianna Everett, *Texas Cherokees* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 132n; Emmett Starr, *History of the Cherokee Indians* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Yesterday Publications, 1979), 95, 464. James Foster was one of the signers of the Treaty of New Echota. In 1837 he signed over his property in Cass County, Georgia, to his daughter, Tiana (Diana) Foster Rogers. This document is in National Archives Record Group 75. Tiana Foster Rogers was W.W. Keeler's great-great-grandmother.

⁷ Guion Miller Applications, James C. Blythe, #5407, 1909, Sarah Ann Carr, #6851, 1909, John Vaughan Library, Northeastern State University. Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

⁸ Joe Williams, *Bartlesville* (Bartlesville, Oklahoma: TRW Reda Pump Division, 1978), 22, 25.

⁹ *Tulsa* (Oklahoma) *Tribune*, July 23, 1949; *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, December 9, 1949.

¹⁰ Philip H. Viles, Jr., "Introduction," in Lori N. Curtis, *The J.B. Milam Library: A Short-Title Catalog* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University of Tulsa Associates, 1993), viii.

¹¹ Pat Ragsdale and Kim Teehee, *Cherokee Nation Legal History Course Syllabus* (Tahlequah: Cherokee Nation Office of Justice, 1993), 8–9, 11–12. The syllabus refers to the Curtis Act of 1898 which called for dissolution of the five tribal governments, and the 1906 Five Tribes Act which was amended to allow the governments of the tribes to remain in full force and effect until Congress determined otherwise. This resulted in the Five Tribes remaining functional, but it greatly lessened their effectiveness and influence.

¹² *Tulsa* (Oklahoma) *World*, May 11, 1950.

¹³ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1988.

¹⁴ *Tulsa Tribune*, July 30, 1957.

¹⁵ Blanch Keeler Adams' son, K.S. "Bud" Adams, Jr., owner of the Houston Oilers Professional Football Team, donated funds for the construction of the rural village in tribute to his mother.

¹⁶ The Theatre at Tsa-La-Gi, *History, The Cherokee Heritage Center* (Tahlequah, Oklahoma: Cherokee Nation, 1990), 5.

¹⁷ Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 10.

¹⁸ Ralph Keen, personal comments to members of the Cherokee Nation Legal History Course, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, January 16, 1993.

¹⁹ (Tahlequah, Oklahoma) *Cherokee Nation Newsletter*, August 15, 1967.

²⁰ Rennard and William M. Strickland, "Beyond the Trail of Tears: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Cherokee Survival," in *Cherokee Removal, Before and After*, ed. William L. Anderson. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 128–129.

²¹ Ragsdale and Teehee, *Course Syllabus*, 19–42.

²² Woodward, *The Cherokees*, 322.

²³ W.W. "Bill" Keeler campaign flyer, 1971, author's collection.

²⁴ Sam Hider campaign flyer, 1971, author's collection.

²⁵ *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, September 5, 1971.

²⁶ Constitution of the Cherokee Nation, 1975, Cherokee Heritage Center Archives, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

²⁷ Martin Hagerstrand and Marian Hagerstrand, personal comments to author, January, 1993. Chief W.W. Keeler appointed Martin Hagerstrand the first executive director of the Cherokee National Historical Society.

²⁸ W.W. Keeler Papers, Cherokee Heritage Center Archives, Tahlequah, Oklahoma; Five Tribes Inter-Tribal Council, press release, July 13, 1967.

²⁹ Thomas E. Mails, *Cherokee People, The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Council Oaks Books, 1992), 338.

³⁰ *The Houston* (Texas) *Post*, August 25, 1987.

³¹ *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, May 24, 1987.

³² Anderson, *Cherokee Removal, Before and After*, 150.

³³ Richard Keeler to author, January 18, 1993.