

GENERAL STORES, RETAIL MERCHANTS, AND ASSIMILATION: RETAIL TRADE IN THE CHEROKEE NATION, 1838-1890

By *Duncan M. Aldrich**

The image of the frontier trader as a half-civilized, half-savage individual who spent his life in the wilderness exchanging guns and trinkets for animal pelts has been firmly implanted in the minds of many Americans. From James Fenimore Cooper's hero in the *Deerslayer* to Robert Redford's portrayal of Jerimiah Johnson, the image of the Indian trader as the deserter of civilization's complexities for the cleansing environment of virgin forests has remained. Clothed in animal furs, although speaking English, the Indian trader has been portrayed as the heroic product of the cultural marriage between European institutions and the American frontier. As a mythological figure the Indian trader was freed from geographical roots and directed his actions toward adventure. Trade was merely an excuse for his lifestyle.¹

Less romantically, the government of the United States viewed the trader as white America's major contact with Indian people. In order to insure that commercial activities fostered friendship rather than belligerence, the government enacted various regulations designed to eliminate unruly traders and unfair practices. Thomas Jefferson, among others, believed that a well regulated trading system would demonstrate to the Indians the benefits of white American material culture and would thus encourage them to adopt Anglo-America's agrarian civilization. The maintenance of a series of government owned and operated Indian trading posts during the first three decades of the nineteenth century represented the peak of such intervention in commercial relations with the Indians. Yet, government posts failed to displace private operators. And the army, incredibly undermanned, seemed unable to prevent violations of trade regulations.

Although the government posts were unsuccessful, their failure does not imply that the assumption that assimilation would result from trade contacts was incorrect. Rather, failure merely demonstrated the inadequacy of the government's trading system. The examination of retail merchants and general stores within the Cherokee Nation between 1838 and 1890 indicates the extent to which commercial relations fostered assimilation regardless of federal policy, and discredits, in one case, the popular image of the Indian trader as a footloose adventurer.²

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¹ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), pp. 88-98.

² Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts 1790-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 84-93.

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By the late nineteenth century the general stores of Indian Territory were providing a new injection of Anglo-American Culture.

The development of commercial relations between Anglo-Americans and the Cherokees occurred in three distinct phases: the period of initial contacts, the frontier period, and the post Civil war period. The initial period, which extended from the first Indian/white encounters until the federal removal of the Cherokees to Oklahoma in 1836, was characterized by the entry of private traders into Cherokee territories in Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. Establishing residences within the Cherokee homeland, some of these traders became members of the tribe through marriage. Unless officially adopted by the tribe, Cherokees forbade white traders from opening stores. On the other hand, the adopted white traders provided the first permanent retail establishments within Cherokee tribal territories. The development of general stores in the Nation prompted the establishment of supply routes for wholesale goods between Cherokee settlements and Anglo-American cities and towns. White men constructed roads to connect Tennessee and Kentucky with the East and such routes hastened the growth of

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merchant activities in the Cherokee Nation. The sons of white traders who had married into the tribe opened stores along these highways. Overall, the replacement of buckskin clad transient traders by general stores and wholesale purchases characterized the first phase of commercial relations.³

During this time, Daniel Ross, a white trader, married a Cherokee woman and set up a trading post in the Cherokee Nation. Although accepted as a member of the tribe, Ross retained his Anglo-American business principles, and soon became one of the tribe's wealthiest members. Ross also retained his respect for white American educational institutions, and sent his mixed-blood sons to American schools in Tennessee. His third son, John Ross, was a member of the first generation of native born Cherokees who became successful merchants. John received his education in Kingston, Tennessee. When he returned to his Cherokee homeland John opened a store in partnership with Lewis Ross and John Meigs. John Ross started his second store in partnership with Timothy Meigs in 1816. Cherokee merchants of Ross' generation whose backgrounds resembled his included John Ridge, Elijah Hicks, and Richard Brown. All were educated in white schools and entered the mercantile business in their Georgian homeland. Generally obtaining their wholesale goods from Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, these merchants occasionally travelled as far as New York City to make purchases.⁴

Removal to the Indian Territory in 1836 marked the beginning of the frontier phase of Cherokee commercial relations with the United States. The federal government hoped that by removing the Cherokees from the influence of encroaching whites the government would give the Indians room in which they could more easily adopt Anglo-American civilization. The Cherokees found themselves in an isolated and unimproved wilderness. Like so many frontiersmen before them, they faced the problem of establishing new communities within the social vacuum of the frontier. The opening of new trade routes with eastern wholesaler centers comprised the merchants' greatest difficulty. The establishment of stores in profitable locations and the development of a surrounding market also constituted major

³ The division into periods is made to facilitate the discussion of the material. Early Cherokee history is presented in David H. Corkran, *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-1762* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); and Rachel Caroline Eaton, *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians* (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1914). For the development of roads and trade routes see Eaton, *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians*, p. 20.

⁴ Eaton, *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians*, pp. 2-3, 5, 28, 33.

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problems. John Ross, John Ridge, and others of their generation, forming the nucleus of the Cherokee trading community in their new homeland, shouldered the responsibility of reestablishing connections with eastern centers. The immigration of white traders into the area dwindled during the frontier period.⁵

An influx of more white American entrepreneurs into the Cherokee merchant community typified the post Civil War period. The Civil War had undermined the Cherokee economy and the subsequent loss of capital demanded that new sources be found. The immigration of white merchants into the Nation in part helped alleviate the problem. Moving into the Nation to establish profitable business, these white store operators inadvertently improved the Cherokee economy by bringing both money and capital goods into the Indian Territory. As in the past, tribal laws required that all merchants who set up business in the territory marry into the tribe. Thus the Cherokee Nation received a new injection of Anglo-American culture after the Civil War. The merchant community tacitly remained Cherokee although practically all of its members were either white men or their descendants. After Oklahoma attained statehood in 1907 the laws no longer required that immigrants marry Cherokees and incoming white merchants soon superseded the Cherokees as leaders of the merchant community.⁶

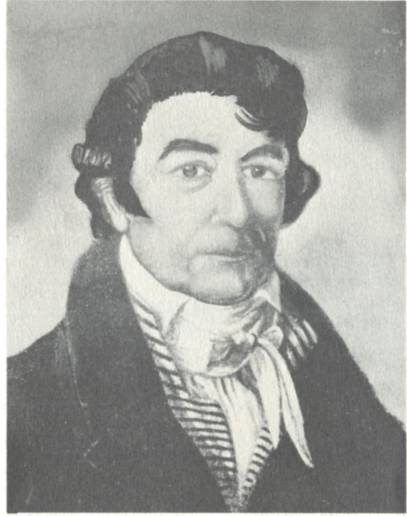
The frontier and post Civil War periods function as indicators of the extent to which the Cherokees accepted and retained the principles of the

⁵ Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (New York: Norton and Company, 1973); Mary E. Young, "Indian Removal and Land Allotment: The Civilized Tribes and Jacksonian Justice," *American Historical Review*, Vol. LXIV (1958). For a discussion of the effects of the frontier environment see Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 1-22. The notion that immigration of whites into the Cherokee Nation dwindled is founded upon the statistical survey of merchants conducted for this study. The individual merchants included in the sample taken were selected from newspaper advertisements and from tax records. Small merchants who evaded both mediums are not included. This approach may, therefore, tend to incorporate only the more well-to-do merchants into the sample. The sample is composed of 28 merchants of some 123 merchants who could be identified as operating within the Cherokee Nation during the period under consideration. Sufficient evidence was available for only the twenty-eight individuals considered in the sample. Short biographies of each member of the sample were constructed from evidence in the *Cherokee National Papers* and the *Indian-Pioneer Papers* in the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma and the *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah).

⁶ On post Civil War economic disruption in the Cherokee Nation see Arrell M. Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries* (Norman: Harlow Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 217-218.

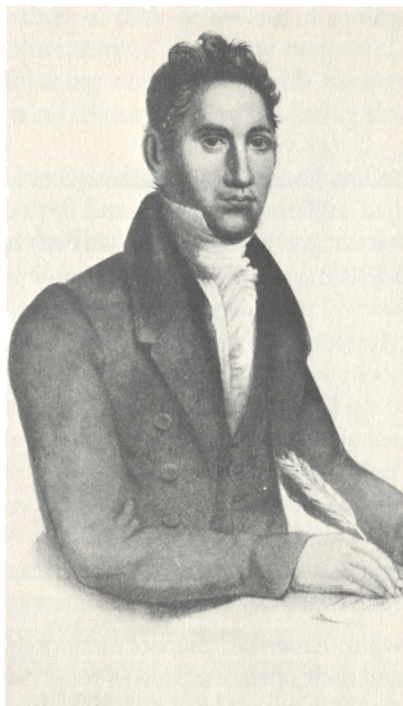
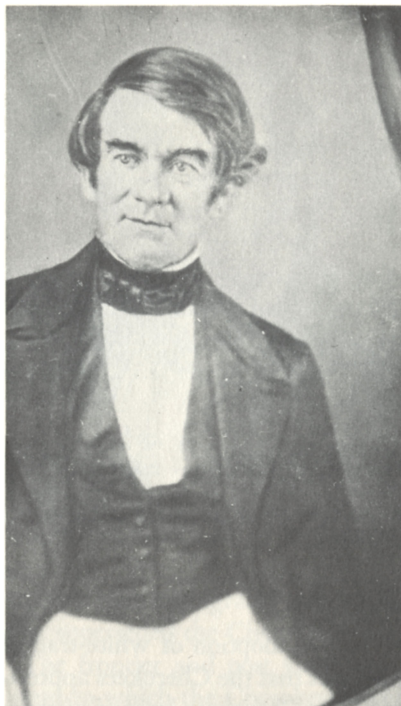
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Daniel Ross, a white trader who married a Cherokee woman and opened a trading post in the Cherokee Nation, Georgia.



white American market economy. Their initial adoption of white traders and their open reception of retail trade indicates that the Cherokees appreciated the material benefits of white culture. The Cherokees learned of these benefits in their eastern homeland and carried the institution that provided such material goods, the general store, to the Indian Territory. The Cherokees who established their society in the Indian Territory had actively engaged in retail merchandising for only slightly more than a generation before their immigration. Yet, prominent historians have suggested that for many pioneer groups the frontier environment tore society down to its fundamental premises and then gradually replaced the old social values with a new hybrid society partially shaped by the hardships of frontier life. If this was true among the Cherokees then the Anglo market economy had become a fundamental premise of Cherokee society within less than two generations, for in Oklahoma the Cherokee retained their general stores as major links between Anglo material wares and the Cherokee economy. The large number of stores Cherokees established in the Indian Territory suggests that acceptance of the market economy may even have increased after the migration to Oklahoma. That a society would so readily accept the methods of another in so short a period, however, seems unusual. A more likely explanation for Cherokee establishment of a market economy in Oklahoma is that having been forcefully removed en masse from their homeland the Cherokees had no mother country to turn to for assistance

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John Ross (left) and John Ridge (right), two Cherokee merchants who helped form the nucleus of the trading community after the Cherokee removal to present-day Oklahoma.

during their initial years of frontier settlement. Anglo-America was the only viable alternative for material assistance.⁷

Immediately upon arrival in the Indian Territory the Cherokees established general stores. Functioning as service centers for nearby agriculturalists, the Cherokee stores catered to farm demands. Selling nails, cloth, rifles, medicines, dry goods, needles, yarns, farm implements, and practically every other item manufactured in the United States or Europe, the Cherokee general stores carried products identical to those sold in white frontier communities. By providing the local residents with a large variety of items

⁷ Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, pp. 97-116; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association 1893* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), pp. 190-227.

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manufactured outside of the Nation, the merchants freed their patrons from the chores of hand fashioning their own household and farm tools.⁸

The physical structures of general stores resembled those constructed in Anglo-American frontiers. As in other frontiers, variety was the rule. Most of the earliest stores were simple log structures. As small crossroad centers developed into towns, however, many of the original log buildings were replaced by wood, brick, or stone edifices. Yet, stores established in outlying communities throughout the period were still constructed from logs. For example, the major store in Flint, Indian Territory, was a mere log structure built in the 1870s. Located on the edge of a swamp, the Flint store rested in the center of the tiny village and, like many similar establishments, also functioned as the local post office. Many stores throughout the territory included a second story in which the store managers or clerks resided.⁹

Most Cherokee stores were located in small towns like Flint. Even Tahlequah, the Nation's capitol and largest town in 1894, had fewer than two thousand residents. The town's forty-eight business establishments were situated on the main street. Three drugstores, three cobbler shops, three restaurants, two hardware stores, a billiards hall, three grocery stores, two dressmaking shops, two barber shops, a photography parlor, an opera house, a tin shop, one bank, two jewelry stores, one meat market, and a variety of stables and harness shops were scattered along Tahlequah's main thoroughfare. The capital's six general stores were located on the three blocks of the main street which centered on the capitol building.¹⁰

Vinita, the second largest town in the Cherokee Nation in 1886, had a population of six hundred. Somewhat smaller than Tahlequah's business district, Vinita's business district contained three general stores; all of them located on the main intersection of town. Scattered along six of the main street's central blocks were three restaurants, two meat markets, five groceries, three hotels, two drugstores, two confectionary shops, an ice cream parlor, an agricultural implements shop, and various other businesses ranging from hardware stores to jewelry shops. Such smaller towns as Webber's Falls, Oaks, Claremore, and Bartlesville usually had from two to four general stores. Many other small towns possessed only one merchandise establishment.¹¹

⁸ Browse through any issue of the *Cherokee Advocate*.

⁹ Interview, Tuxie Miller, *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, Grant Foreman, ed., Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

¹⁰ *Map of Tahlequah, Indian Territory* (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Company Limited, 1894).

¹¹ *Vinita, Indian Territory* (New York: Sanborn Maps and Publishing Company Limited, 1886).

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Merchants removed to the Indian Territory overcame problems of supplying themselves with wholesale goods soon after their arrival in Oklahoma. Exploiting the transportation potentialities of the Arkansas River, the Cherokee merchants quickly opened business relations with wholesalers in Van Buren, Arkansas. Until the railroads opened other options to the merchants, Van Buren remained the major source of wholesale goods. Steamships provided the facilities needed to transport goods along the Arkansas. In 1828 the steamship *Fidelity* made the first run from Van Buren to Fort Gibson. By the late 1830s, steamship companies made weekly round trips between the two river ports. Two firms, Henry, Cunningham & Company and P. H. White & Company competed for freight business on the Arkansas in the pre-war period. Van Buren merchants received their goods by way of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers from New Orleans, Louisiana. By the 1890s the river trade extended into the Indian Territory as far as Tulsa. Railroads absorbed much of the river traffic after the 1870s. As a consequence, steamboats and railroads dominated transit of goods.¹²

The initial importance of the Arkansas River as a line of supply and the later impact of the railroads as carriers of wholesale goods had some impact on urban growth patterns within the Cherokee Nation. Fort Gibson on the Arkansas and Vinita on the intersection of two major railroads grew in response to their strategic locations. These towns possessed varied business establishments centering on the import, export, and distribution of products. Towns not located along the transportation networks generally remained small in size and centered on the single general store, blacksmith shop, and post office. Tahlequah, although lacking a railroad or waterway, attracted a relatively large urban population because of the location of the Cherokee Government there. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century the discovery of coal and oil generally fostered the establishment of larger urban centers.¹³

Although the advantages of river transportation and the relative proximity of Van Buren to Cherokee settlements encouraged Cherokee store owners to purchase their goods from Van Buren wholesalers prior to the construction of the railroads, several Cherokee merchants chose to order their goods from wholesalers in St. Louis, Missouri; Kansas City, Missouri; Chicago, Illinois; New York City; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and New Orleans. The firm of Martin & Adair of Fort Gibson, for example, ordered goods from a variety of cities prior to the Civil War. In August 1856, the firm pro-

¹² *Cherokee Advocate*, March 23, 1853, April 10, 1845, January 30, 1855, May 14, 1849 and July 17, 1848.

¹³ *Tahlequah*, Sanborn Map.

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cured general merchandise from three separate St. Louis firms, and in September of the same year they bought hats, caps, and hardware from St. Louis. In the same year they purchased their drugs and medical supplies from a Philadelphia firm. They invested from \$50.00 to \$450.00 in each transaction.¹⁴

Eastern wholesalers attracted prospective Cherokee purchasers through newspaper and brochure advertisements. The official newspaper of the Cherokee Nation, *The Cherokee Advocate*, contained advertisements from Van Buren, New Orleans and New York City. Wallace & Ward, Van Buren wholesalers, advertised regularly in the *Advocate* as did Sickles & Company drug wholesalers of New Orleans. Both P. H. White & Company and Henry, Cunningham & Company, located in Van Buren, advertised in the *Advocate*. The steamboat *Menedo* was also advertised in the Cherokee papers. Throughout the period the number of companies that advertised in the *Advocate* increased. From the first, however, enough ads were run weekly to keep the local merchants informed of prospective eastern wholesalers.¹⁵

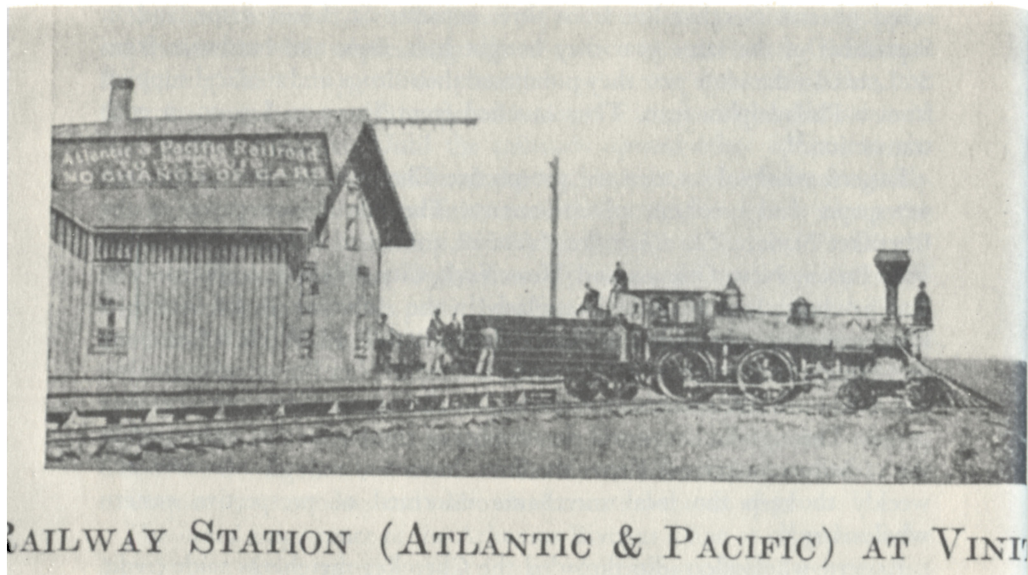
Eastern wholesalers also provided the Cherokee merchants with credit. Contracts detailing credit transactions between Cherokees and outside wholesalers are scarce. The major indications that Cherokee merchants sought outside credit are collection notices from Missouri lawyers and questionnaires from credit rating services. Acting as debt collectors, John O. Day & Brothers, attorneys of Springfield, Missouri, wrote a letter demanding that a Cherokee merchant pay a debt he owed to a St. Louis firm. The Cherokee National papers contain many questionnaires from credit rating bureaus. Most credit questionnaires originated in the St. Louis branch of the National Credit Bureau and were addressed to merchants residing in Vinita. Asking for information on the business habits and personal lives of Cherokee merchants, these questionnaires indicated to outside creditors the reliability of individual members of the Cherokee business community. Available evidence indicates that most loans simply involved the exchange of wholesale goods for promissory notes.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Cherokee National Papers*, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. For invoices received by Martin & Adair, see Cherokee National Papers box 11 folder 146, box 36 folder 58, box 36 folder 49, box 36 folder 52, box 36 folder 55, and box 36 folder 57.

¹⁵ *Cherokee National Papers*, box 142, box 37 folder 77; *Cherokee Advocate* contains advertisements which demonstrate ads in most issues. See the June and July issues of 1845 and 1875 for a comparison of number of ads run in differing decades.

¹⁶ O'Day & Brothers to Messers Bill and Douglas is in the *Cherokee National Papers* box 19 folder 50. Commercial agency questionnaires are in box 20 folder 109, and are throughout box 142.

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Vinita, once the second largest town in the Cherokee Nation, was an important commercial center because of its railway connections.

The preceding description of the products merchants offered for sale, their sources of credit, the transportation networks they exploited, the towns in which they lived, and their sources of wholesale goods indicates that in Oklahoma entrepreneurial capitalism formed the basis of the Cherokee economy and that as frontiersmen the Cherokee merchants established a functioning market system. The merchants themselves are left to be described. Forming a diverse group, the most notable similarity among the merchants who set up business in the Indian Territory was membership in the Cherokee tribe. In the following discussion of a sample of twenty-six Cherokee merchants neither race nor culture are employed to define tribal membership. Legal membership in the tribe is the only criterion used to differentiate members from non-members.¹⁷

¹⁷ The simple percentages presented in the remainder of the paper are based upon the sample of twenty-eight merchants discussed in footnote seven.

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From the sample of twenty-six, thirty-eight percent of the merchants were born in the South. More than one-half of the southern born merchants who operated within the Cherokee Nation were native born Cherokees. The career of Johnson Thompson, born in Cass county, Georgia, in 1822, illustrates the background of Georgia born Cherokee merchants who moved to the Indian Territory during the removal period. The son of a white man and a Cherokee woman, Thompson attended missionary and private schools until age fifteen. At that time his family moved to the Indian Territory. He continued school in Arkansas for three years and then began clerking for his uncle, proprietor of the J. M. Lynch & Company. In 1843 Thompson married Eliza C. Taylor, the daughter of a Cherokee chief. Thompson embarked upon his own mercantile venture in the winter of 1846-1847.¹⁸

A minority of the Southern born merchants who migrated to the Cherokee Nation claimed European ancestry. Like the Cherokee merchants, these whites generally entered business in the Territory prior to the Civil War. Raised in New Orleans, Florian H. Nash moved to the Indian Territory at age sixteen in 1853. Soon after arriving in the Territory he secured a clerkship in the store of William P. Dencla in Fort Gibson. By 1863 he bought out his employer's interest in the store. Before obtaining the business he married Fanny R. Vann, a grand niece of John Ross.¹⁹

Thirty-five percent of the sample were raised in the North. Coming from New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, New Jersey, and Kansas, most of the northerners arrived in the Cherokee Nation after the Civil War. Born in Ohio in 1837, John S. Scott's background typified the careers of Yankees who moved to the territory in the post bellum years. Attending school until age fourteen, Scott moved with his family to Humboldt, Kansas, in 1857. There he started a mercantile firm in 1860, but it was burned by a Confederate raiding party. Enraged by the attack, Scott recruited a company of Indians and entered the United States army in May, 1862. He soon changed sides, however. Taken captive and incarcerated in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Scott became sutler for a Confederate regiment. In 1863 he accompanied the regiment in their move to Fort Gibson. After returning to Kansas in 1865, Scott moved back to Fort Gibson in 1871 and opened his own general store. In the same year he married Margaret Coody, a member of a prominent Cherokee family.²⁰

¹⁸ H. F. & E. S. O'Beirne, *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators, and Leading Men* (Saint Louis: C. B. Woodward Company, 1892), p. 380.

¹⁹ *Indian Territory* (New York: Lewis, Firm, Publishers, 1901), pp. 568-570.

²⁰ O'Beirne, *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators, and Leading Men*, pp. 273-274.

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A small group of foreign born merchants also moved into the Cherokee Nation after the Civil War. Joseph Heinrichs, born in Germany in 1851, emigrated to the United States in 1867. Landing in New York, he soon moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, to live with his brother and sister. He then moved to Little Rock where he worked as a cobbler's apprentice for three years. In 1871 he returned to Fort Smith where he went into the shoemaking business for himself. Nine months later he moved to Tahlequah and set up a shoe-making establishment. Heinrichs began buying and selling furs and hides soon after he opened his store in the territory; he bought a stock of groceries in 1879, and by 1891 operated a shoe store which had expanded into a general merchandising firm. Heinrichs married Lucy Kilpatrick, member of the prominent Hilderbrand family, in 1874.²¹

A final group of the sample, native Cherokees born within the Indian Territory, accounted for nineteen percent of the merchant community. Representative of this group, Major De Witt C. Lipe was born near West Tahlequah in 1840. The son of a white New York entrepreneur and a Cherokee woman, Lipe attended a seminary in Cane Hill, Arkansas, after graduating from the Cherokee common schools. His first business experience came as a clerk in his father's general store in Tahlequah. In 1870 he became a full partner with his father in a branch store located in Fort Gibson. Lipe soon sold his share, however, and reinvested his capital in the livestock business. In 1861 Lipe married Victoria Hicks, the daughter of the prominent merchant, Elijah Hicks.²²

Other than the fact that they were merchants and operated within the Cherokee Nation, the most noticeable similarity among all of the above individuals was that they all married into important Cherokee families. Seventy-seven percent of the sample of twenty-six merchants belonged to one of ten Cherokee families. The Rosses, related to about nineteen percent of the merchants, were by far the most influential merchant family in the Nation. The Ridges, Mayes, Hicks, Thompsons, Vanns, Coodys, Lynches, Bryans, and Hildebrands comprised the other important families within the merchant community. Cherokee laws, which required that all merchant and traders operating within the national boundaries marry into the tribe, encouraged the adoption of promising entrants into Cherokee families. The newcomers quickly became well known and respected citizens of the tribe. Of eighteen merchants who belonged to the ten major mercantile families between 1838 and 1890, forty-four percent were white men who had married

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

²² *Indian Territory*, pp. 606-608.

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kee blood tremendously. Among the merchant class, cultural values were diluted as well. Most merchants who were neither white nor half blood had either a grandfather or great grandfather who had been a white trader who married into the tribe. Cherokee merchants of all blood types participated in economic pursuits introduced by their forefathers. For most, general store operations were merely one aspect of their capital investment. Many owned ranches, farms, gristmills and railroad stock. One, Elias C. Boudinot, attempted to establish a tobacco factory in the Indian Territory. Failing in the venture, he reinvested his funds in a hotel in Fort Gibson. Throughout his life he developed schemes for incorporating Cherokee national railroads and for acquiring valuable Cherokee real estate. Boudinot's schemes involved him in at least one lengthy civil suit. Joel Mayes Bryan, an early immigrant to the territory, owned at least ten stores in the Cherokee Nation when he died. Bryan also owned two grist mills and a part in the salt licks located near Saline, Cherokee Nation.²⁴

Tremendous geographical mobility among the Cherokee merchants also indicated their affinity to Anglo-American capitalism. On the average they changed residences four times in their lifetimes. The most common change was from one state to another. Shifting from one community to another within the same state also accounted for a high percentage of the moves. Very few of the relocations, on the other hand, were international. Johnson Thompson made his first move with his family from Georgia to the Indian Territory in the 1830s. Establishing a store in Tahlequah, he remained there until the Civil War ended, at which point he shifted his operations to Vinita where he also ran a farm. In 1876 he returned to Tahlequah. George Washington Tarvin moved ten times. Born in Baldwin County, Alabama, his family relocated into Fort Bend County, Texas, when Tarvin was a small boy. After the Civil War Tarvin moved to Mexico for ten years. Returning to Texas, he lived in San Angelo for several years. In 1885 he changed his residence to Muskogee, then to the Verdigris River, on to Vinita, and then to Red Fork. Tarvin finally settled permanently in Okmulgee.²⁵

The employment records of the merchants in the sample further illustrates their entrepreneurial tendencies. At least fifty-four percent of them clerked in a merchandise store at some point in their lives. Thirty-one percent had farmed, nineteen percent had raised cattle, twelve percent had been

²⁴ *Cherokee National Papers*, box 3 folder 31, box 1 folder 35, box 3 folder 57; Interview, J. M. Bryan, *Indian-Pioneer Papers*, Foreman, ed., Western History Collection.

²⁵ O'Beirne, *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators, and Leading Men*, pp. 380, 386-387.

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involved in the buffalo hide trade, and eight percent had edited newspapers. Other occupations represented in the sample were steamboat captains, drovers, college professors, doctors, cotton planters, school teachers, and shoemakers. One individual, Dr. Morris Frazee, pursued farming, stock raising, doctoring, newspaper editing, and teaching before he took up general merchandising.²⁶

The business discipline needed to operate a large mercantile organization on the frontier remains the strongest indication that the Cherokee merchants, as a group, were successful capitalists. Besides establishing connections with outside wholesalers, the merchants had to locate outside markets for Cherokee agricultural products. As in most agricultural frontiers, the Indian Territory rarely contained enough currency to service the local economy. In order to alleviate the currency problem merchants accepted payment in produce from their patrons. Exporting the commodities they obtained from their customers, the merchants functioned as produce middlemen. Furs, hides, butter, cotton, chickens and corn constituted the majority of products exported from the Cherokee Nation. Responding to a barter economy, Cherokee merchants stated clearly in the *Cherokee Advocate* that they would accept commodities instead of cash. Likewise, several Arkansas firms indicated that they would also exchange wholesale goods for produce. Often owning their own ranches and farms, many Cherokee merchants were involved in the economy from production to marketing, wholesaling and distributing.²⁷

Socially and politically the Cherokee merchants, along with cattlemen, farmers and other entrepreneurs, formed the upper class of the Cherokee Nation. Rather than comprising a unified political group, however, the merchants clung loyally to two opposing political parties. The issue that divided the Treaty party and the full bloods was bitter. Led by Elias C. Boudinot, Stand Watie, and John Ridge, members of the treaty party signed a document which ceded all Cherokee territory located east of the Mississippi River to the United States in exchange for federal lands lying in what is presently northeastern Oklahoma. The full bloods insisted that the treaty was illegal, refused to sign it, and remained in their eastern homeland until the federal army removed them in 1838. Arriving in the Indian Terri-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

²⁷ Advertisements throughout the *Cherokee Advocate* indicate that Cherokee merchants were willing to accept commodity payments in lieu of cash. For a discussion of currency problems in colonial regions see, Curtis P. Nettles, *The Money Supply of the American Colonies Before 1720* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, Bookseller, 1964), pp. 179-228.

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After statehood incoming white merchants soon superseded the Indians as leaders of the merchant community in many areas.

tory, the full bloods, under the leadership of Chief John Ross, murdered several of the treaty party's leaders. From these murders until the Cherokee Nation became a part of the state of Oklahoma in 1907, politics within the tribe centered around those two groups.²⁸

Although the full bloods are popularly considered a conservative group whose main objective was to retain Cherokee culture, full blood leaders actually comprised one of the most Americanized elements in the Indian Territory. John Ross received his education in an Anglo-American school and engaged in general merchandising. His brother-in-law, John Stapler,

²⁸ For a background to Cherokee politics see Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), pp. 284-295.

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operated one of the most successful merchant establishments in the territory. Both were aggressive entrepreneurs whose capitalistic goals reflected the ambitions of white American businessmen. Merchants of the treaty party also operated within the principles of the American economy. Elias Boudinot, editor of the *Cherokee Advocate*, attempted to establish a tobacco factory, and Stand Watie engaged in various general store operations during his long life. A large percentage of Cherokee merchants participated in politics, several of them attaining high national office. As leaders of their nation's two major political factions, the merchants shared the common belief in the dictates of American capitalism. They did not attack the fundamental premises of the American economy, the only assaults they made against the capitalists of the United States were efforts to prevent American corporations or businessmen from attracting the patrons of Cherokee merchants. The quarrels between the treaty party and the full bloods involved matters other than economic philosophy.²⁹

In fact Cherokee laws which restricted immigration of whites tended to strengthen the socio-political condition of the merchants. Anglo-Americans who decided to do business in the Cherokee Nation had either to ally themselves with a Cherokee family through marriage or give up their businesses. Whether consciously or not, such laws limited competition to existing factions. By forbidding outsiders to establish branch offices in the nation, the merchant community prevented non-Cherokees from undermining local enterprises.³⁰

By 1890 the Cherokee economy closely resembled its counterpart in the larger society. In fact, the Cherokee Nation was strongly tied to American markets and wholesalers. Railroads owned by Americans crossed Cherokee dominions and white-owned steamboats plied up the Arkansas River from Little Rock and Fort Smith. General merchandising was not carried on by bearded frontier Indian traders. Rather, Cherokee descendants of Indian traders who had married into the tribe and more recent immigrants whom the tribe adopted performed the nation's mercantile functions. The Chero-

²⁹ *Cherokee National Papers*, box 54 (unprocessed). Cherokee merchants who attained political prominence included John Ross, John Ridge, W. P. Ross, Samuel H. Mayes, John Bullette, De Witt Clinton Lipe, Wallis Webber, and others.

³⁰ For full bloods see Foreman, pp. 284-295. Laws relating to merchants are listed in *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation* (Saint Louis: R. & T. A. Ennis, 1875), pp. 204-206, 238, 240. Other than railroads, which they saw would benefit shipping, the Cherokees were reluctant to allow outside corporations into the Nation. Federal laws designed to weaken the Cherokee's rights to legislate their own economic organization, such as the Dawes Severalty Act, brought the ultimate end to Cherokee sovereignty.

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kee merchant community had in fact assimilated the values and principles of American entrepreneurial capitalism. The acceptance of white traders into the tribe formed the key to the advent of assimilation. By the time the Cherokees founded their frontier settlements in the Indian Territory the descendents of the adopted traders were important tribal leaders. These individuals accepted capitalist values and functioned, in effect, as America's first pioneer settlers in northeastern Oklahoma.