

Redbird Smith

Redbird Smith (1850–1918) was a Cherokee traditionalist and political activist. He helped found the Nighthawk Keetoowah Society, who revitalized traditional spirituality among Cherokees from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century.

Background

Redbird Smith was born on July 19, 1850 near the current city of Fort Smith, Arkansas. His father was Pig Redbird Smith, whose surname "Smith" was given to him by European-Americans since he worked as a blacksmith. Redbird Smith's mother was Lizzie Hildebrand Smith. His parents were removed from Georgia to Indian Territory. Both his parents were ardent traditionalists, and at the age of ten, Redbird Smith's "father dedicated him to the services and cause of the Cherokee people in accordance with ancient customs and usages."^[1]

Political activism

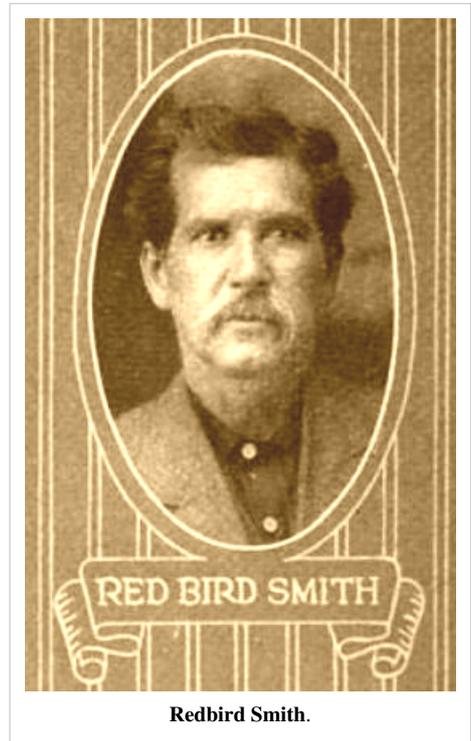
The late 19th century the Dawes Commission sought to break up collective tribal land holdings into individual allotments and open up the "surplus" tribal lands to settlement by non-natives. Redbird Smith led a political resistance movement to the Dawes Allotment Act and sought to return to traditional Cherokee religion and values.^[2]

In 1887 and 1889, Redbird Smith served as a tribal councilor from the Illinois District of the Cherokee Nation.^[3]

Redbird Smith stated in the early 1900s:

"I have always believed that the Great Creator had a great design for my people, the Cherokees. I have been taught that from my childhood up and now in my mature manhood I recognize it as a great truth. Our forces have been dissipated by the external forces, perhaps it has been just a training, but we must now get together as a race and render our contribution to mankind. We are endowed with intelligence, we are industrious, we are loyal and we are spiritual but we are overlooking the Cherokee mission on earth, for no man nor race is endowed with these qualifications without a designed purpose... Our pride in our ancestral heritage is our great incentive for handing something worthwhile to our posterity. It is this pride in ancestry that makes men strong and loyal for their principal in life. It is this same pride that makes men give up their all for their Government."^[4]

Redbird Smith repatriated wampum belts belonging to his tribe.^[2] In 1910 he was selected as chief of the Nighthawk Keetoowahs.^[5] Previously he had served as their chairman.^[6] Also in 1910, Smith and fellow Nighthawks traveled to Mexico with an 1820 document supporting Cherokee lands claims but the Mexican government did not support their claims. In 1914, he petitioned President Woodrow Wilson to create a Keetoowah reservation but this was seen as a backward step in the US federal government's assimilation policy. In 1921, a hundred Cherokees from 35 families moved together to the southeastern corner of Cherokee County, Oklahoma, to create a traditional community — "the brainchild of Redbird Smith."^[7]



Redbird Smith.

Family

Redbird Smith married Lucy Fields Smith, born in Braggs, Indian Territory in 1852. She was the daughter Richard Fields and Eliza Brewer Fields. Together the Smiths had ten children who survived into adulthood, including eight sons and two daughters.^[8]

Redbird Smith is the great-grandfather of former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation Chad Smith.^[9]

Death and legacy

After falling ill for 48 hours, Redbird Smith died on November 8, 1918.^[6] He is buried in the Redbird Smith Cemetery in Sequoyah County, Oklahoma.^[10]

He served as chief of the Nighthawk Keetoowahs until his death and was succeeded by Levi Gritts.^[11] His son Sam Smith became chief of the Nighthawk Keetowahs on April 7, 1919.^[8]

The Redbird Smith ground is an active ceremonial ground in Redbird, Oklahoma, where Smith's July 19th birthday is celebrated annually.

Notes

[1] Starr 479

[2] Conley 197

[3] Starr 279

[4] Starr 481

[5] Conley 202

[6] Starr 480

[7] Conley 203

[8] Starr 483

[9] Conley 226

[10] "Sequoyah County." (<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~oksequo2/redbird.html>) *Rootsweb*. (retrieved 24 Aug 2010)

[11] Starr 482

References

- Conley, Robert. "The Dawes Commission and Redbird Smith." ([http://books.google.com/books?id=oUNc49jXdjoC&pg=PA193&dq="Redbird+Smith"&hl=en&ei=aZN0TParMYK88gbJ4MzkBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCsQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q="Redbird+Smith"&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=oUNc49jXdjoC&pg=PA193&dq=)) *The Cherokee Nation: A History*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005: 193-199. ISBN 978-0-8263-3235-6.
- Starr, Emmet. *History of the Cherokee Indians and Their Legends and Folklore*. ([http://books.google.com/books?id=Ei0TAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA479&dq="Redbird+Smith"&hl=en&ei=aZN0TParMYK88gbJ4MzkBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q="Redbird+Smith"&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=Ei0TAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA479&dq=)) Oklahoma City: The Warden Company, 1921.

External links

- Redbird Smith (<http://www.cherokee.org/Culture/70/Page/default.aspx>), on the Cherokee Nation website
- Red Bird Smith and the Keetoowah Society (<http://www.accessgenealogy.com/native/cherbios/page37.htm>), Access Genealogy

Article Sources and Contributors

Redbird Smith *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=485352181> *Contributors:* Charles F Ross, GenQuest, Monegasque, T. Anthony, Uyvsdi, Wolfepack4art

Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors

Image:Redbirdsmithphoto.png *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Redbirdsmithphoto.png> *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* Emmet Starr

License

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported
[//creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)
