

## THE GREAT SEAL OF THE CHEROKEE NATION

By J. Bartley Milam

The great seal of the Cherokee Nation<sup>1</sup> carries a story of hope of Tribe and symbolism of its design. In the center of the seal was a large seven-pointed star surrounded by a wreath of oak leaves. The outside border of this device bore the words, "Seal of the Cherokee Nation." Two words for "Cherokee Nation" in the native language followed, printed in characters from the Sequoyah alphabet and pronounced "Tsa-la-gi-hi A-ye-li." At the lower edge of the seal was the date, "Sept. 6, 1838." This date was that of the adoption of the constitution of the Cherokee nation.

Interpretation of the device in the seal is found in Cherokee folklore and history. Ritual songs in certain ancient tribal ceremonies made reference to seven clans, the legendary beginnings of the Cherokee people. A sacred fire was kept perpetually burning in the "town house" at a central point in the nation. The live oak, the principal hard-wood timber in the old Cherokee country in the Carolinas, was used in keeping the sacred fire. Thus, in connection with this fire, the oak was a symbol of strength and everlasting life.

The seven-pointed star in the Cherokee seal represented the seven ancient clans in tribal lore. Since the oak tree was associated with the mysteries of the sacred fire, the wreath of oak leaves was a symbol of the dauntless spirit of a courageous people.

When first organized under a constitution in the east, the Cherokee government planned to preserve its national history and found a museum. In 1859, the Baptist missionaries, Evan Jones and his son, John Jones, promoted the organization of a secret society, called Keetoowah, among the fullblood Cherokees. Members sought the preservation of Cherokee history and the development of high ideals of individualism. During the war between the states, the Keetoowah sided with the Union.

The seal of the Cherokee nation was adopted by law of the national council and approved by Lewis Downing, principal chief, on December 11, 1869. Lewis Downing had begun his work as a Baptist preacher among his people the same year that saw the adoption of the Cherokee constitution, 1839. During the war between the states, he was commissioned lieutenant-colonel of the Third Indian home guard brigade in the Union Army. In 1867, Colonel Downing was first elected principal chief of the Cherokee nation. In that year, when old factional and political strife had threatened to disrupt the nation again, Rev. Evan Jones and his son succeeded in furthering the organization of the Downing party, an alliance between members of the former Ross party (Union sympathizers)

<sup>1</sup>The author of this article presented to the Oklahoma Historical Society a banner showing the Great Seal of the Cherokee Nation, January 28, 1943.—J. W. M.

and the Confederate Cherokees. From this time, until the close of the Cherokee government just before Oklahoma became a state, the Downing party elected all the principal chiefs in the nation, except one.

In 1869, Colonel Downing was re-elected for a second term as principal chief. The seal of the Cherokee nation adopted by the national council in that year reflected his influence and his associations among his people. One of the darkest chapters in the history of the Cherokees, resulting from the war in the states, had recently closed. The mystic seven-pointed star and the wreath of oak leaves in the seal, surrounded by the name of the Cherokee nation in both English and Sequoyah characters, together with the date of the adoption of the constitution west, formed a symbol of great promise. It heralded a "glorious return" of the united Cherokees pledging their devotion to the highest ideals in their educational, industrial, and religious life.

It is gratifying that recognition has been given the Five Principal Nations of the old Indian Territory in that the great seal of the State of Oklahoma has been worked out of the Seal of the Territory of Oklahoma, and the seals of the Five Indian Nations, namely: Cherokee Nation, Choctaw Nation, Chickasaw Nation, Creek Nation and the Seminole Nation, and 45 stars representing each State of the Union.