

Sehoy's fate

Scholarly sources:

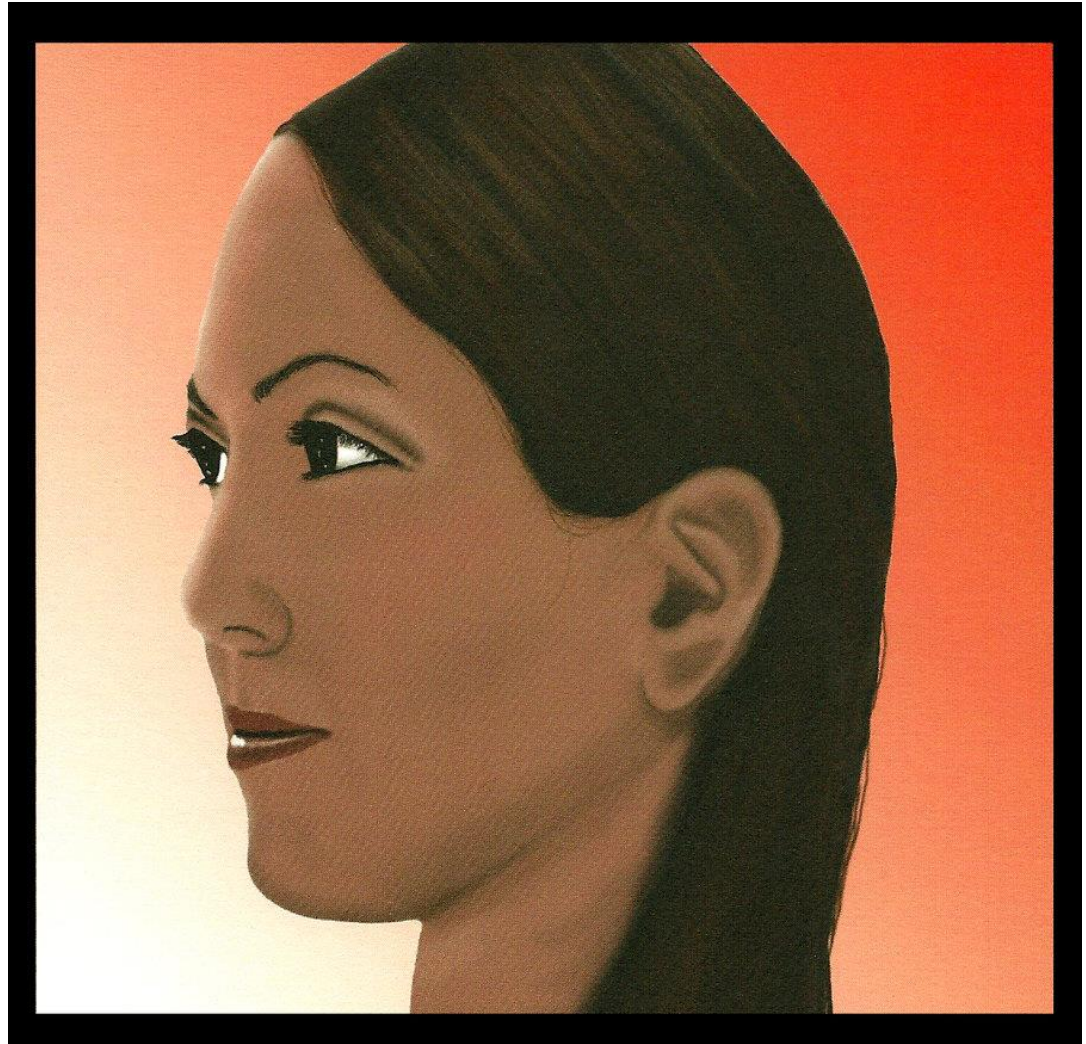
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Meet Sehoy

Sehoy Harjo was a Muscogee Creek Indian living in 1837. She was sixteen.

This was a decade that most of the American Indians across the United States remember with great sorrow.



Our story takes place in late August, when the corn was still green, but ready for a first harvest.

It was usually the time of excitement in the village, when people were preparing for the great Green Corn Festival.



But this year,
people in Sehay's
village of Okfuskee
were a little less
excited.



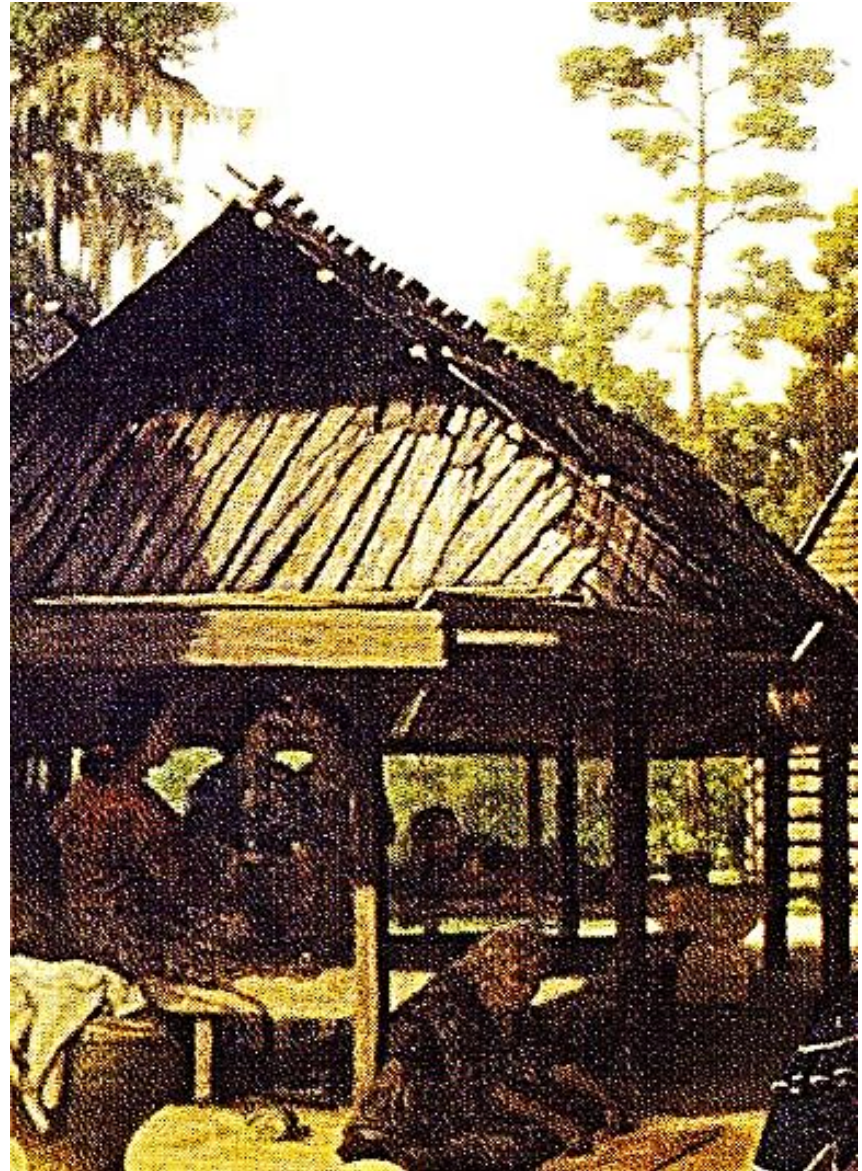
Sehoy and her ancestors had lived in Okfuskee for as many generations as they could count.

The village was located on the streams that flowed from the Little Tallapoosa River—an area that today is central Alabama.

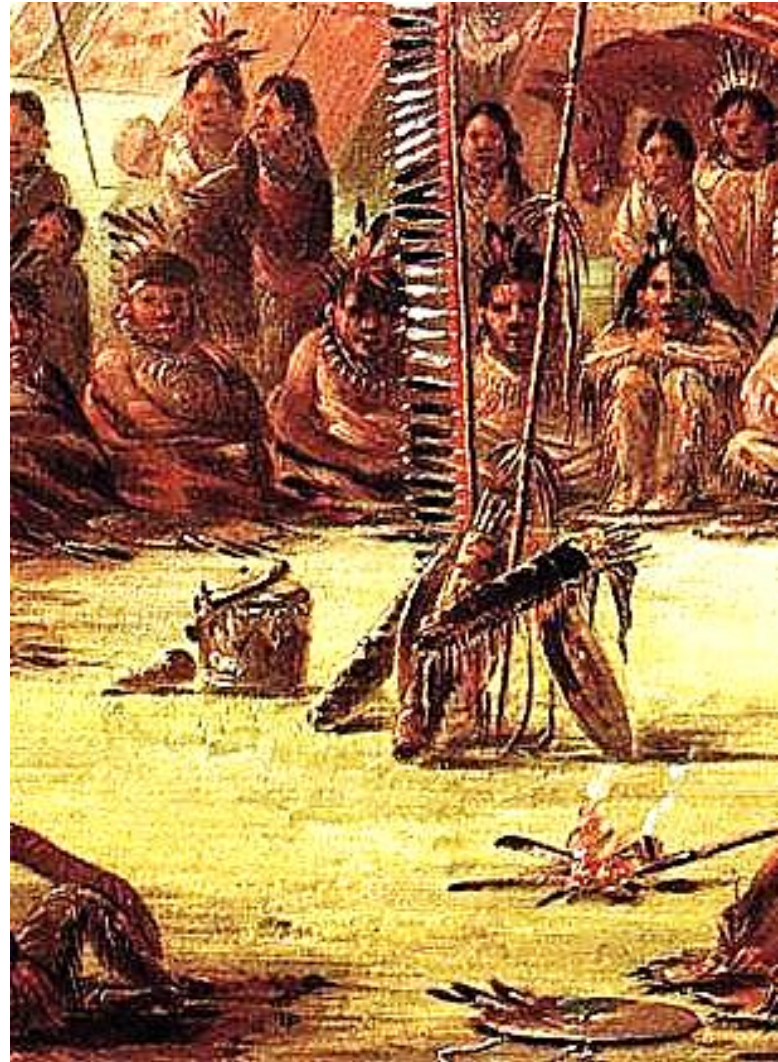


The village had a winter council house, which was a place where the Creek elders met to govern.

It also had a public square for festivals and clan meetings.



Seasonally, the villagers gathered and danced around the fire for sacred ceremonies to preserve the natural order of the lower, middle, and upper worlds . They believed that all good things came from the "Master of Breath" or *Hesaketvmese*. This was their creator god



The part of the village that Sehoj loved best was the Chunkee Yard. This is where young and old came to play games.

And they played all the time.



While they often played field hockey which pitted the men against the women, their main game was chunkee, which, like today's lacrosse, involves someone throwing a spear at a moving disc.

When the Creeks weren't playing the games, they were betting on them, as gambling was a major activity in Okfuskee.

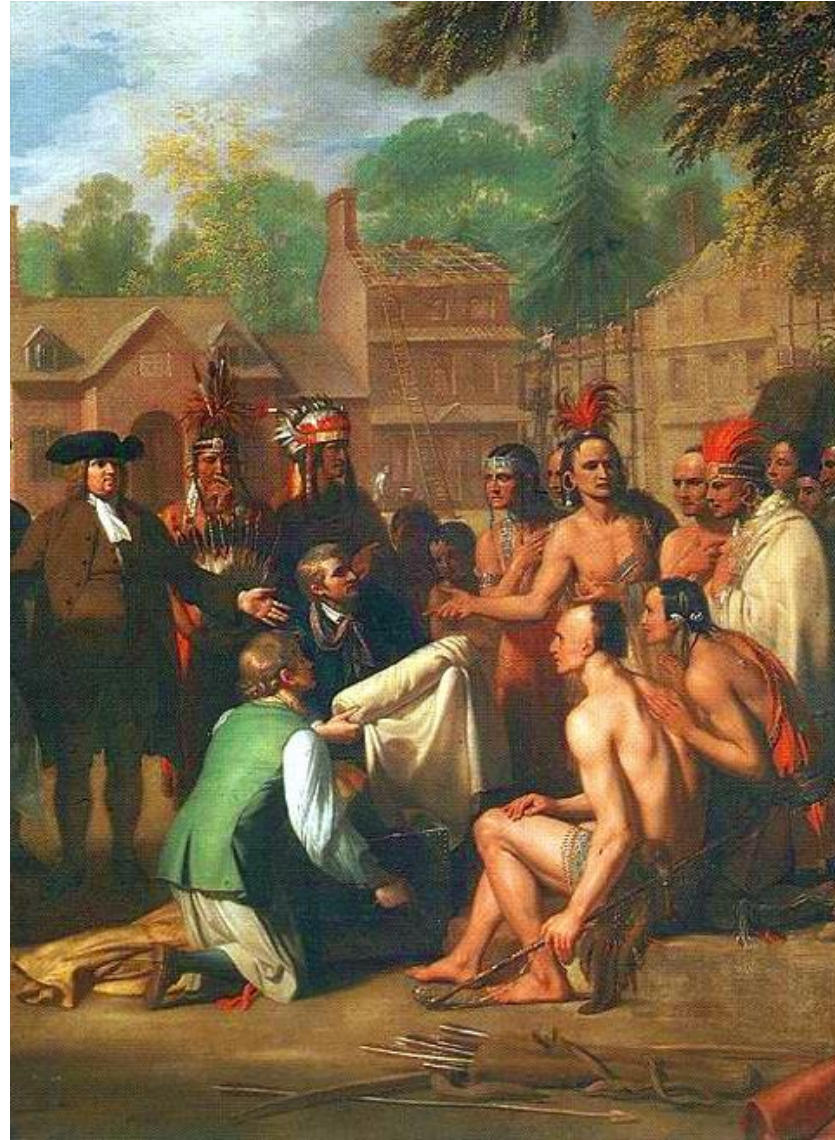


Village life in Okfuskee may have been a lot of fun, but there was some work to do. They farmed, and corn was their main crop. They also hunted deer and other animals, and they fished.



Historically, the Creeks (like most North American Indians) traded with other Indians and white folks. They traded mainly deer skin to the white folks and got brass pots and European clothing in return.

Sehoy and her family knew that the townspeople of Okfuskee had been fortunate up until now. Unlike most other Indians in America, they had not been forced off their land by these trading partners.



But that was all about to change. And it began about the time of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States.

Jefferson and other white leaders made a pact with some Indian tribes in the American southeast. These white leaders said that the Indians could stay on their land if they became "civilized"—which meant that they would have to become like the white man.



Eventually five southeastern tribes agreed to "become civilized:" the Cherokees, the Choctaws, the Seminoles, the Chickasaws, and the Muscogee Creeks.



CHEROKEE



CHOCTAW



MUSCOGEE
(CREEK)



CHICKASAW



SEMINOLE

Sehoy's grandmother Etota had told Sehoy how the white men had "civilized" Creek society.

She described how the Creeks had a stronger matrilineal descent system before the white men came. "Everything was given down from the mother's line back in those days—livestock, belongings, houses. The women set prices for trading. The women owned the homes. They controlled the cornfields and did most of the farming."

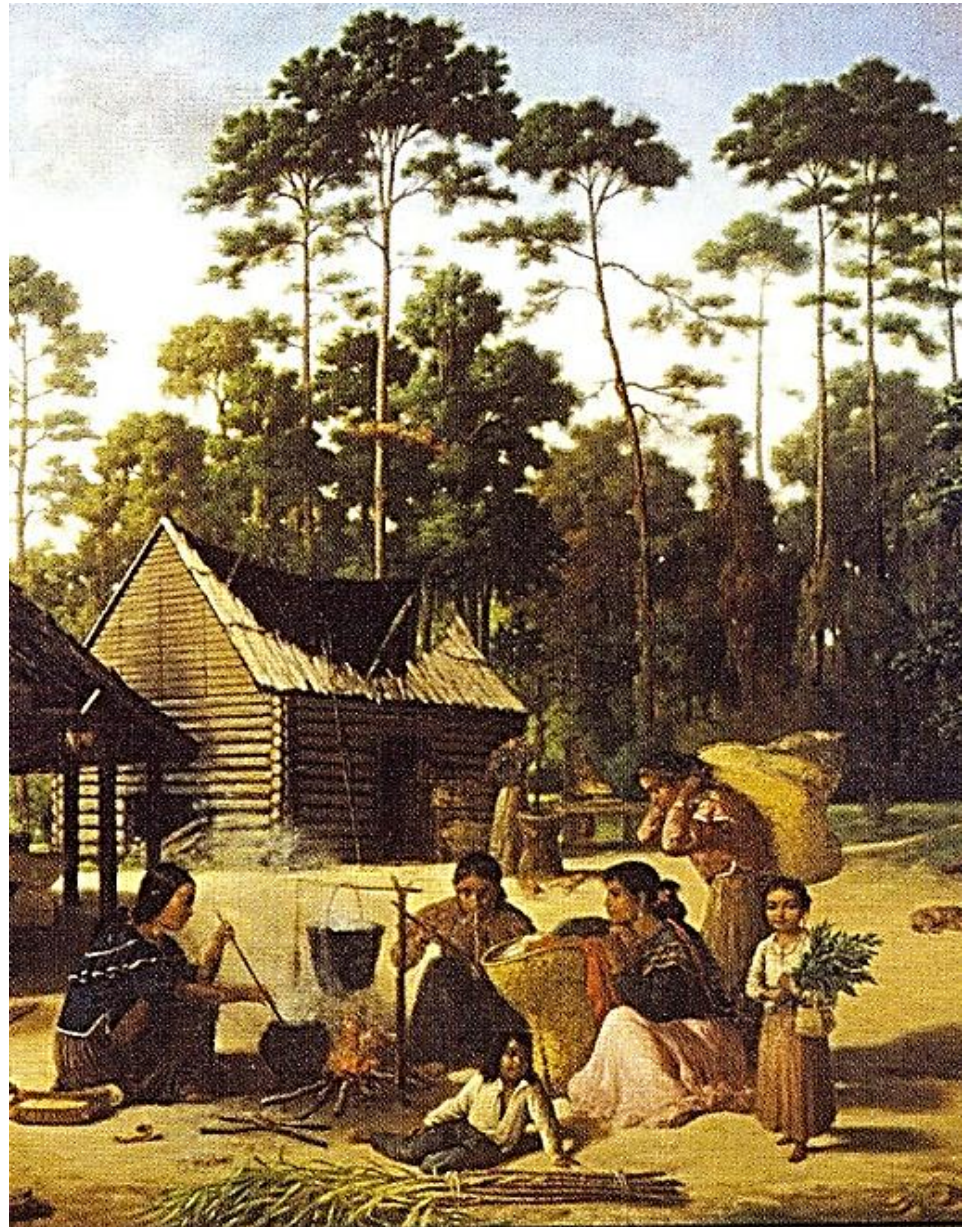


"If a man married a woman, he would have to go to her family's compound to live. And if he mistreated the woman in any way, she would just set his things outside the door and he'd have to leave."

"And the children?" asked Sehoi.

"Oh, like now, they'd always belong to the mother's family," her grandmother responded.

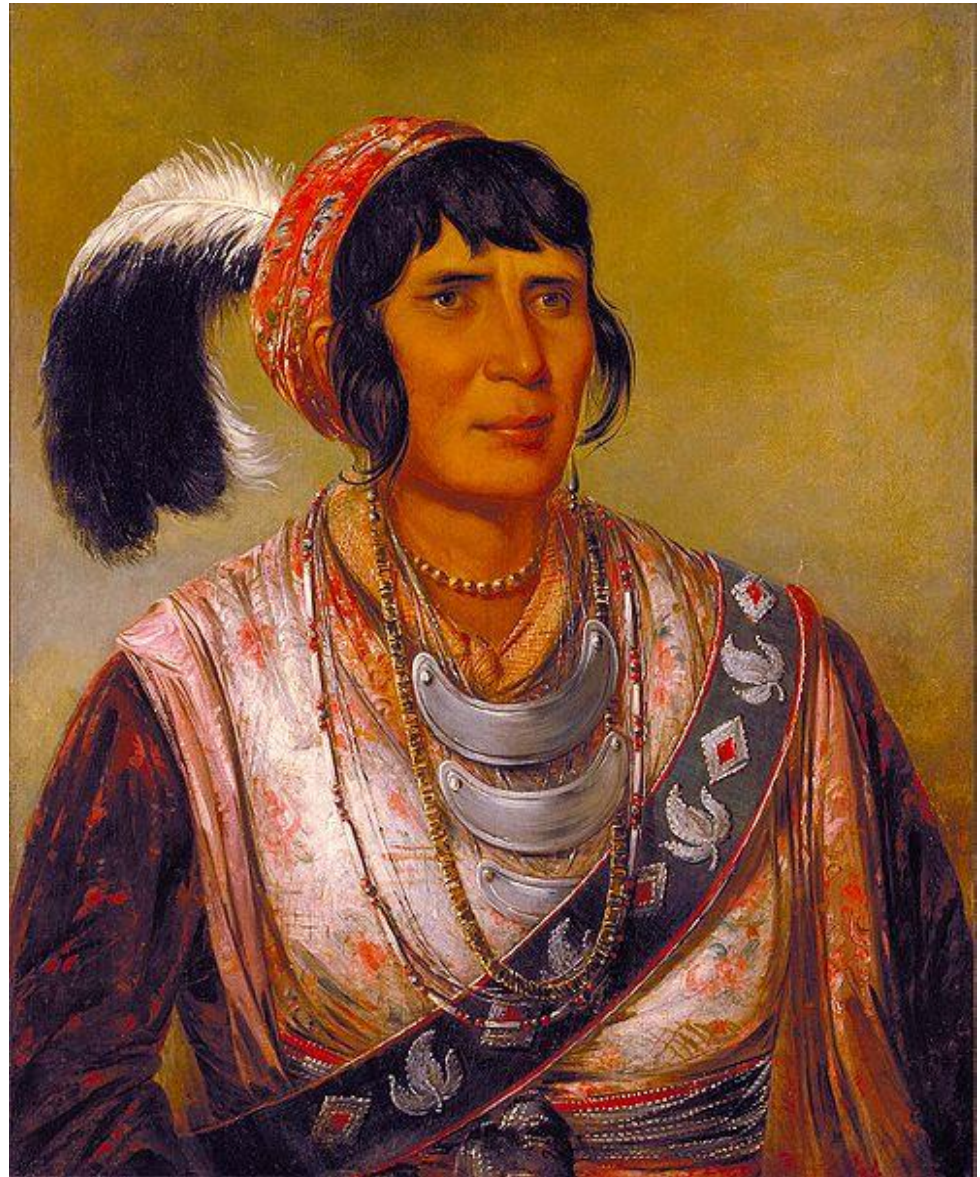
"But our village still practices most of the old ways," insisted Sehoi.



"True, but some did agree to the white man's pact," replied Etota. "Quite a few got trained by the Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins. Men learned white ways of farming with new technologies. They learned how to own private property in their own names."



"And many learned to dress in the white man's finery." Etota continued. "The men were even taught that if they were to be totally civilized, they had to own slaves to do all their work for them."

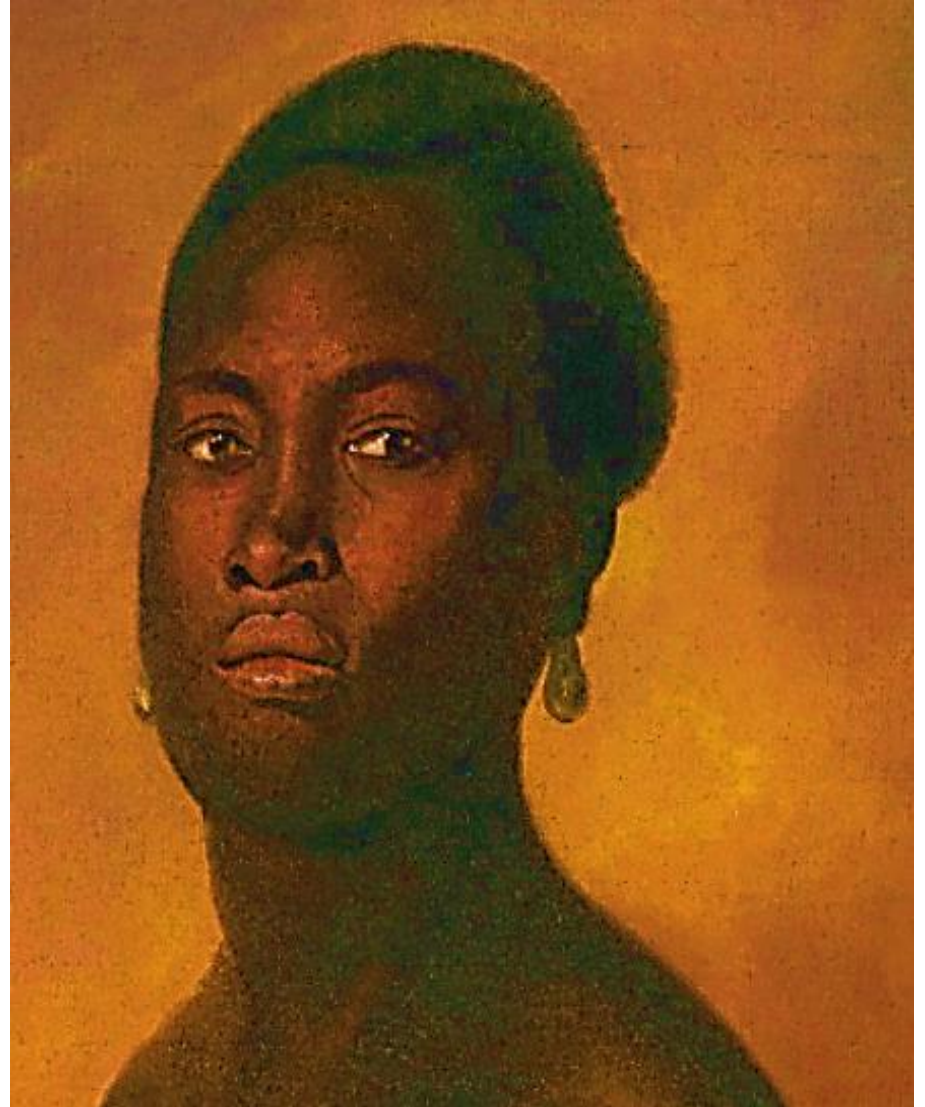


"You mean like the black man Grandison at Jimmy Tawny's place?"

"Yes, he was the first slave of Okfuskee."

"But he wasn't like the white man's slaves. He really never had much work to do. And he got to keep his own crops."

"Shhh!" reprimanded the grandmother. "The white folks don't know this."



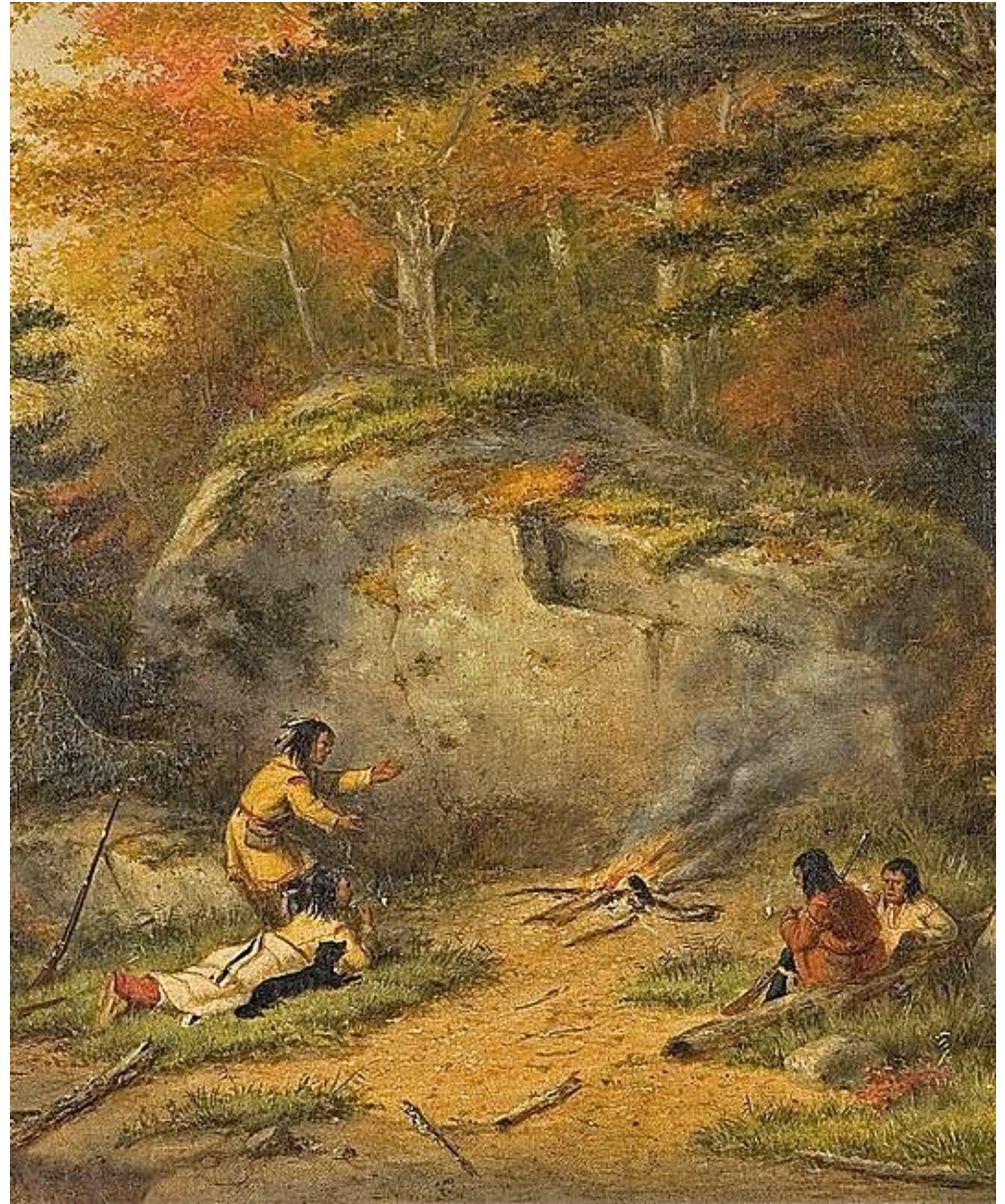
"And what about the women?" asked Seho. "What did the white men want us to become?"

"Ah," sighed her grandmother. "The women were taught how to spin cloth and were told to stay in their homes so the men could run things."

Seho laughed. "Well, we never did that either, did we?"



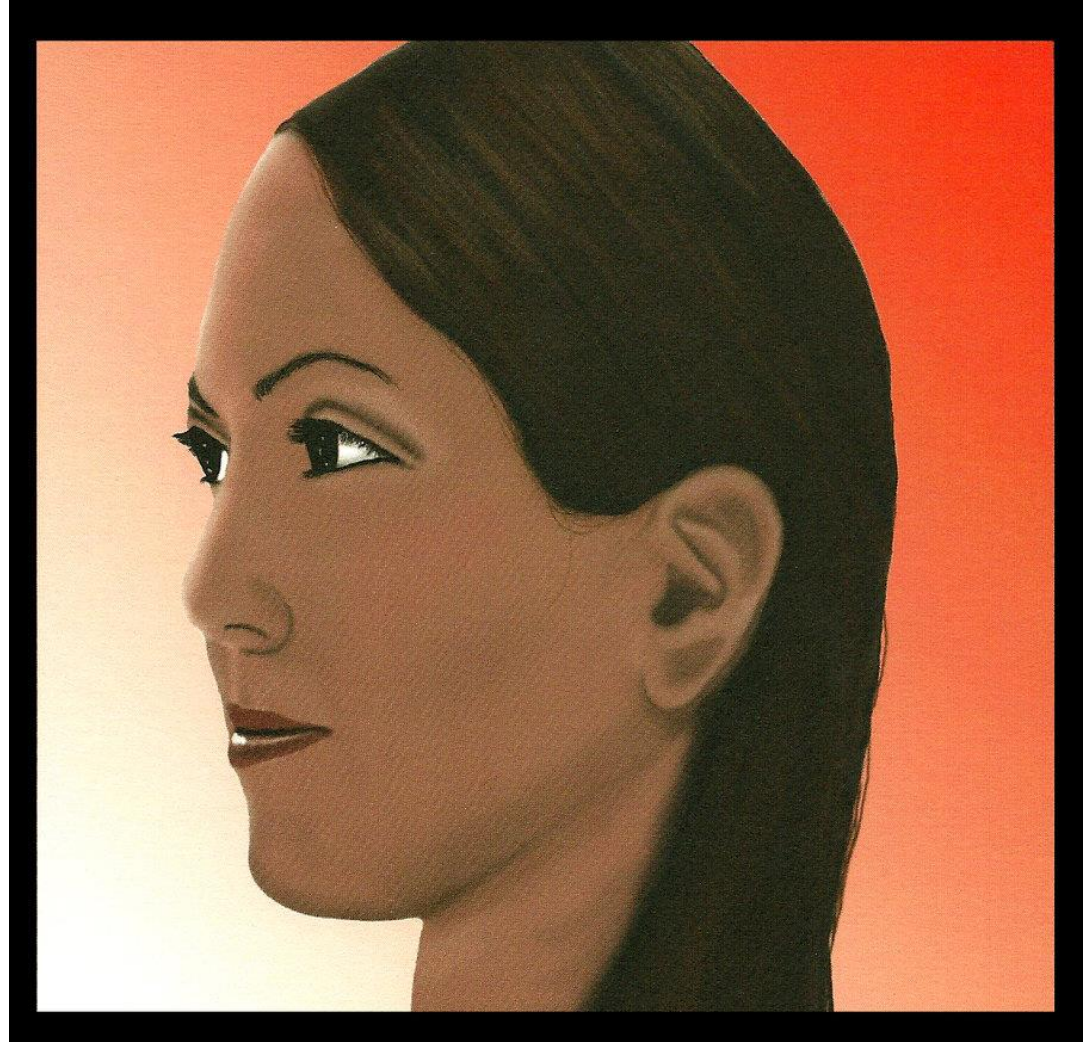
"That's not the point," Etota replied. "The point is that the white people *thought we* did. But we knew they'd never keep their word about letting us stay on the land, so why would we be honest with them?"



But that conversation had taken place five years ago. Today Sehoy looked out at her village and knew that her grandmother's prediction was about to come true.

Sehoy heard every day how other villages had been evacuated and forced to move to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River—all because the Americans wanted their land. She thought it was only days before they'd get the order to move.

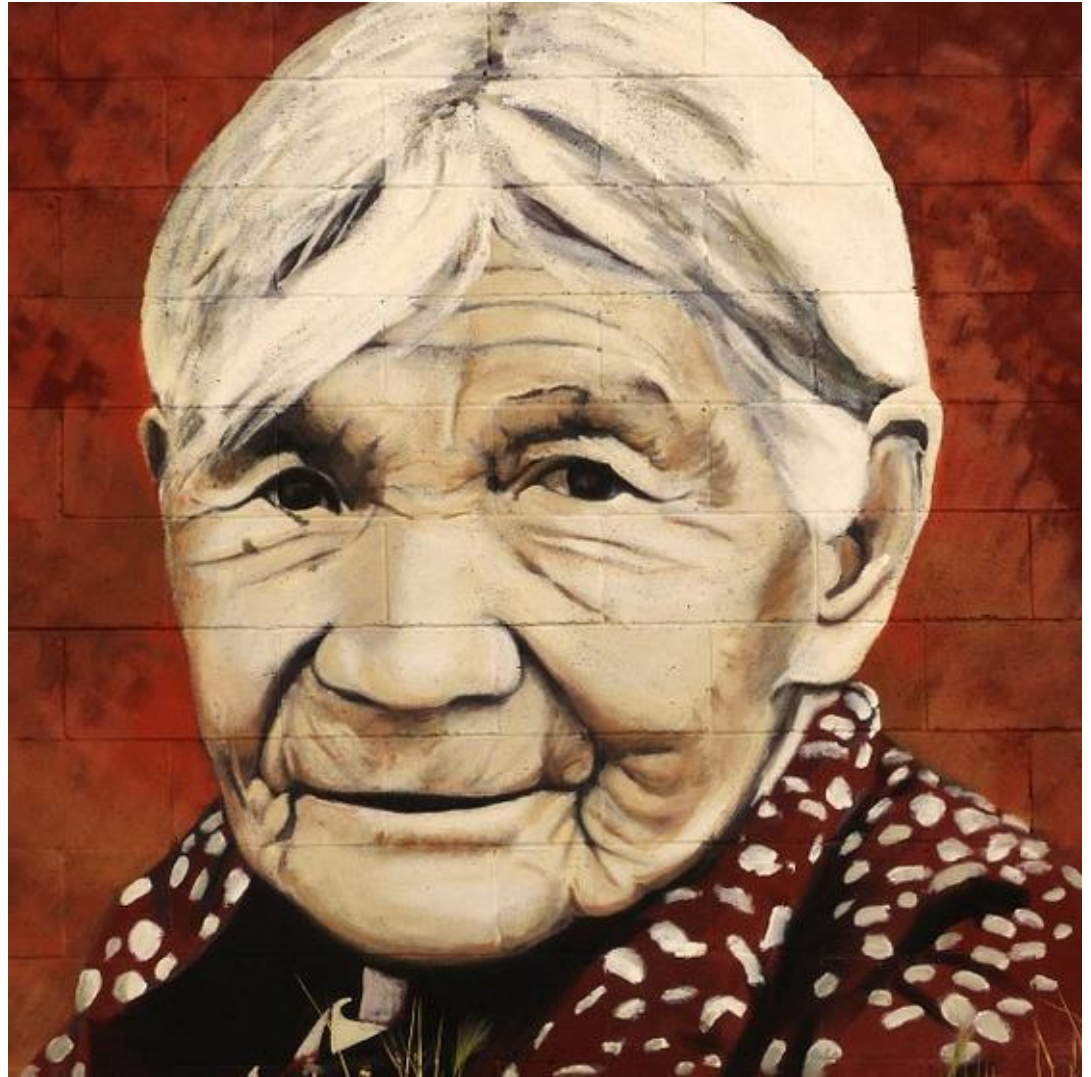
Why would she want to celebrate the Green Corn Festival now? Why would anyone?



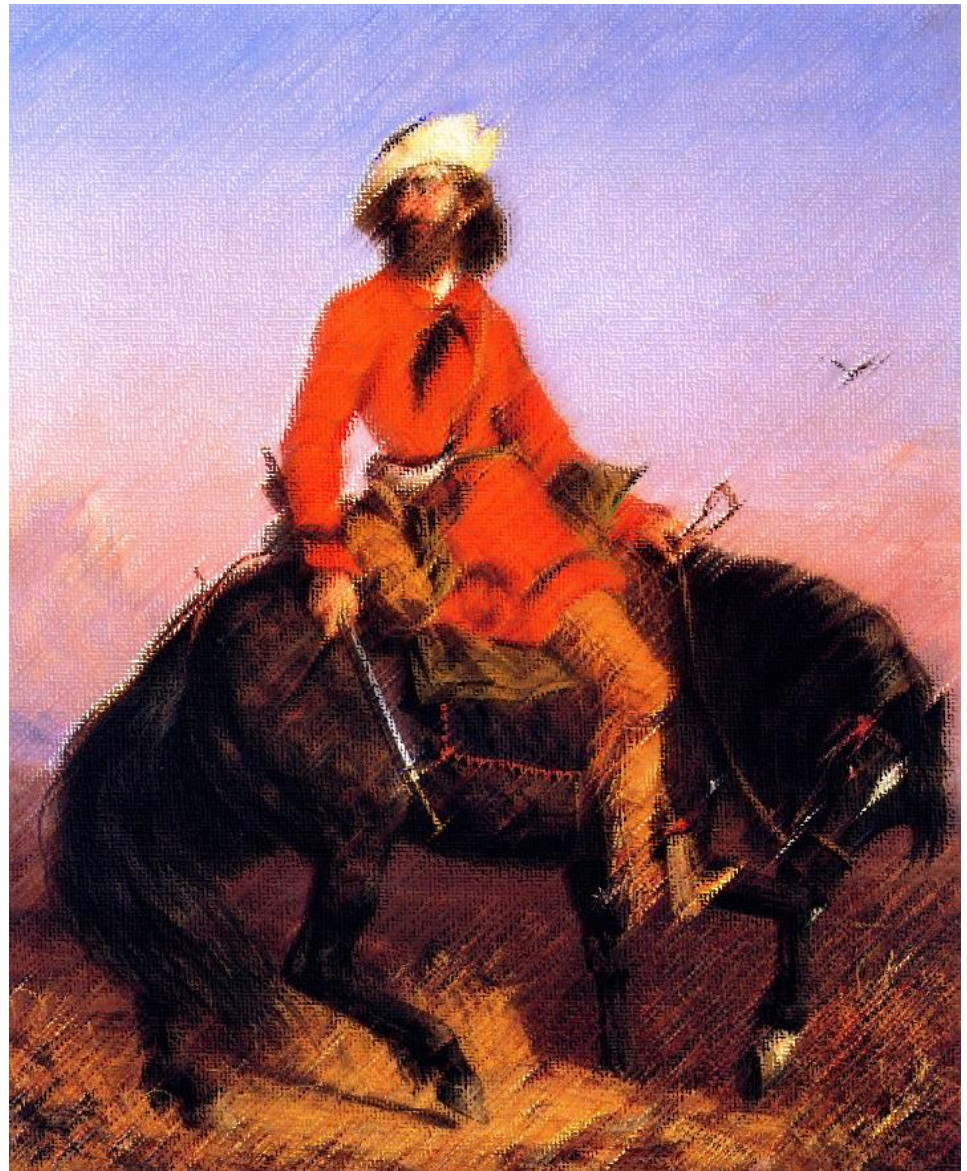
On the day before the festival was to begin, Sehoj's grandmother came to fetch her.

"I think we must call on Jimmy Tawny," she said.

"Why?" whined Sehoj. "Hadn't this white man already sent his Creek kids on to Indian Territory?"

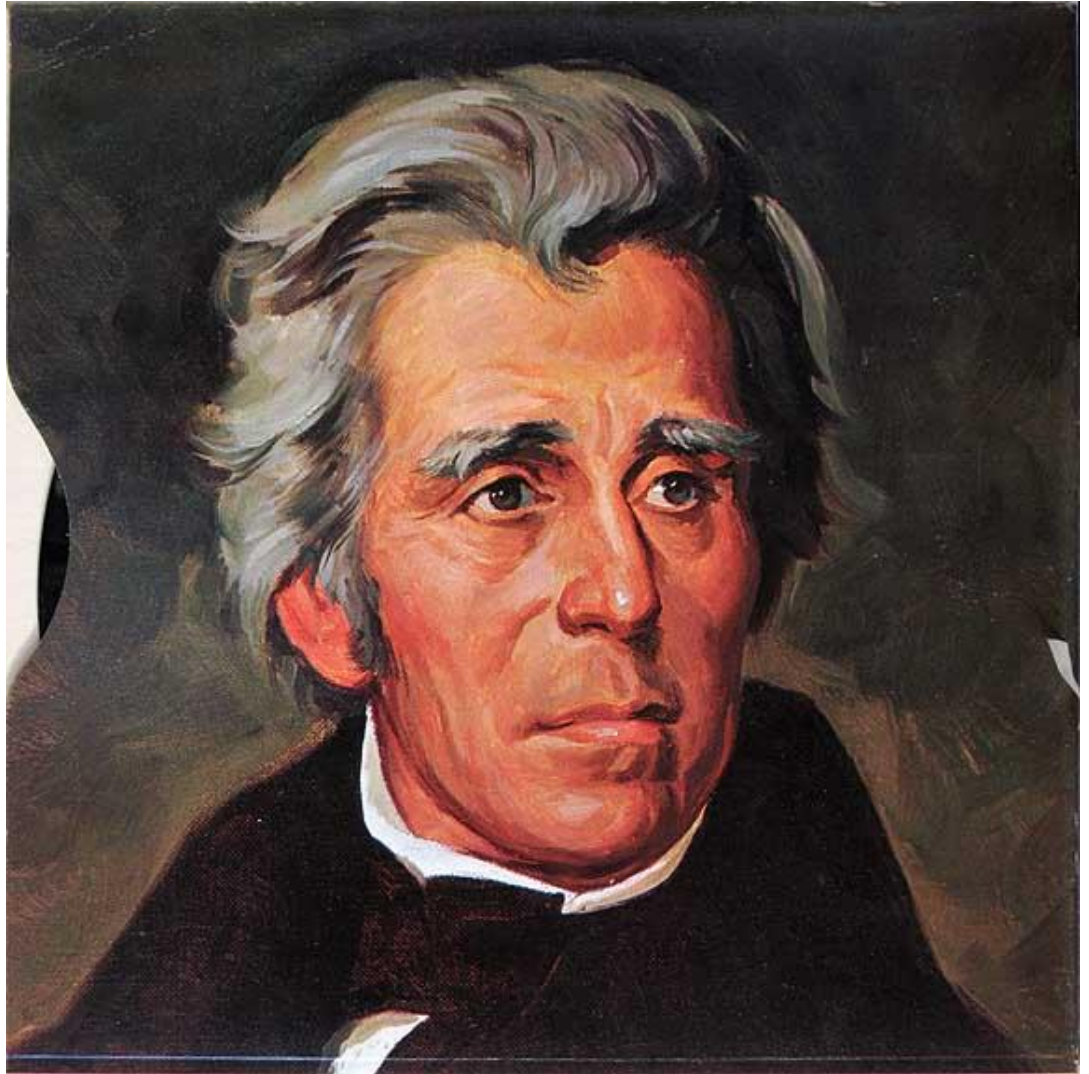


Sehoy knew Jimmy Tawny's history. He'd first come to Okfuskee in 1795 as a white trader. He'd married a Creek woman, had seven children that he gave white names to, and sent them to Georgia to learn to read and write, even though he himself was illiterate.



People in Okfuskee knew Jimmy had been a spy for General Andrew Jackson during his early years in town. But the Creeks put up with him because they believed he had some influence to protect the village.

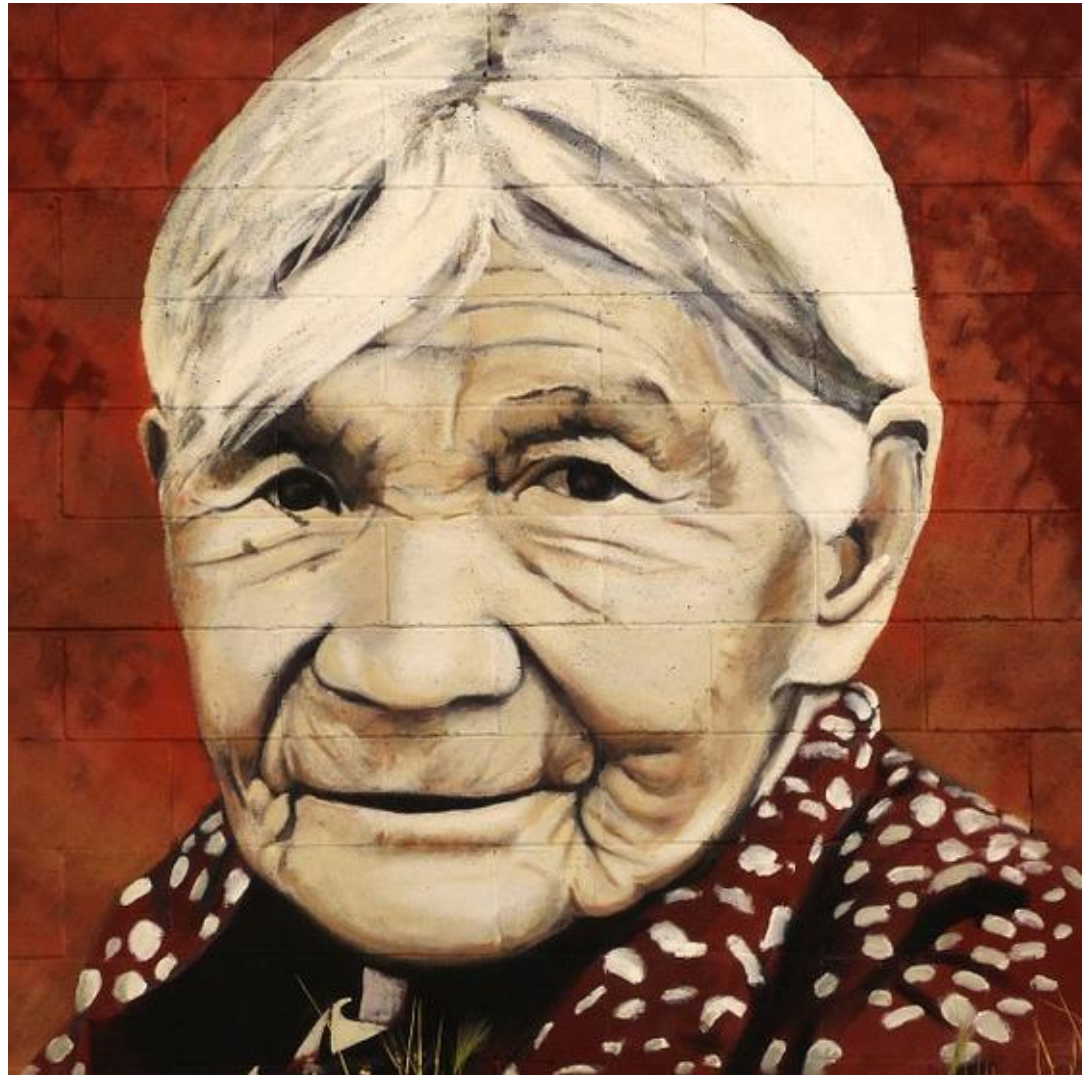
But over the years Jimmy Tawny changed. *He'd become Creek.* And he had no use for the Andrew Jackson who was now president of the United States. This president was now forcing the Creeks off their lands.



"Sehoy," called Etota, realizing that she was lost in thought. "Jimmy Tawny sent his kids out early so they'd at least have a *choice*. They could check out the lands these white folks are pushing us to take and if they don't like it, they can try somewhere else."

"We won't have a choice, will we?"

"I don't think so. And Jimmy now has heard that his son Jackson has died on the way."



"Jackson!" shrieked Sehoy.
"He's the one that agreed
to help the whites fight the
Seminoles under the
promise that we'd be able
to keep our town! How can
this be?"

Etota lowered her head.
"Yes, and to think as an
infant he was named after
General—now President—
Andrew Jackson."



Sehoy sobbed for her townsman Jackson. Everyone loved him.

Every day the news had come about new deaths. Villagers were forced out of their homes at sword point and made to walk hundreds of miles in the cold winters. They were dying by the thousands of disease and hardship.

People were beginning to call the journey "the trail of tears."



"Let's visit Jimmy," Etota repeated. "I saw him earlier near the creek."

Sehoy and her grandmother walked to the water where Jimmy was staring into the forest. He looked so old and worn out.

"Sir," Etota began, as this was the way the Creeks addressed the elderly, "we have heard of the great tragedy of your children on their way to the west."

Jimmy Tawny had a tear in the corner of his eye. "And just today I have a letter that Mr. Dudley at the store has read to me. It's from my oldest son, John P."

"Sir, do go on," Etota urged.



"He has now been on the land in Indian Territory for one planting season. He says the soil is very poor, the crop weak, and the price of corn is too low for his family to survive. There are windstorms every day. It seems that this is land no one else wanted. I am sending him what funds I have."

Sehoy and her grandmother knew that this was what they would face when they were forced to move.



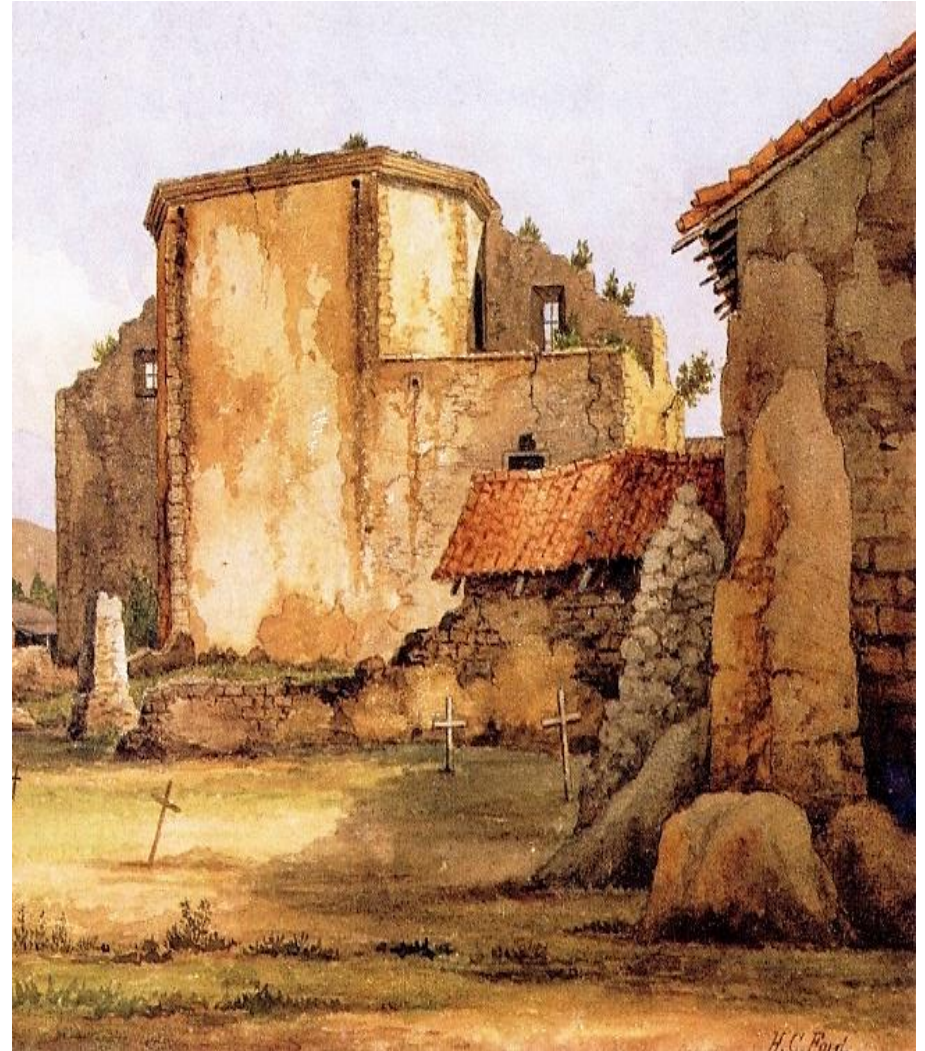
"But I am sending a letter through Mr. Dudley to the other children who are still in Louisiana," Jimmy Tawny went on. "The letter will tell them not to go to Indian Territory."

"But where will they go?" asked Seho. "The Americans will force them back."

"I have carefully researched this with other tribes and with the few white friends I still have."

"Sir, do tell," urged Seho.

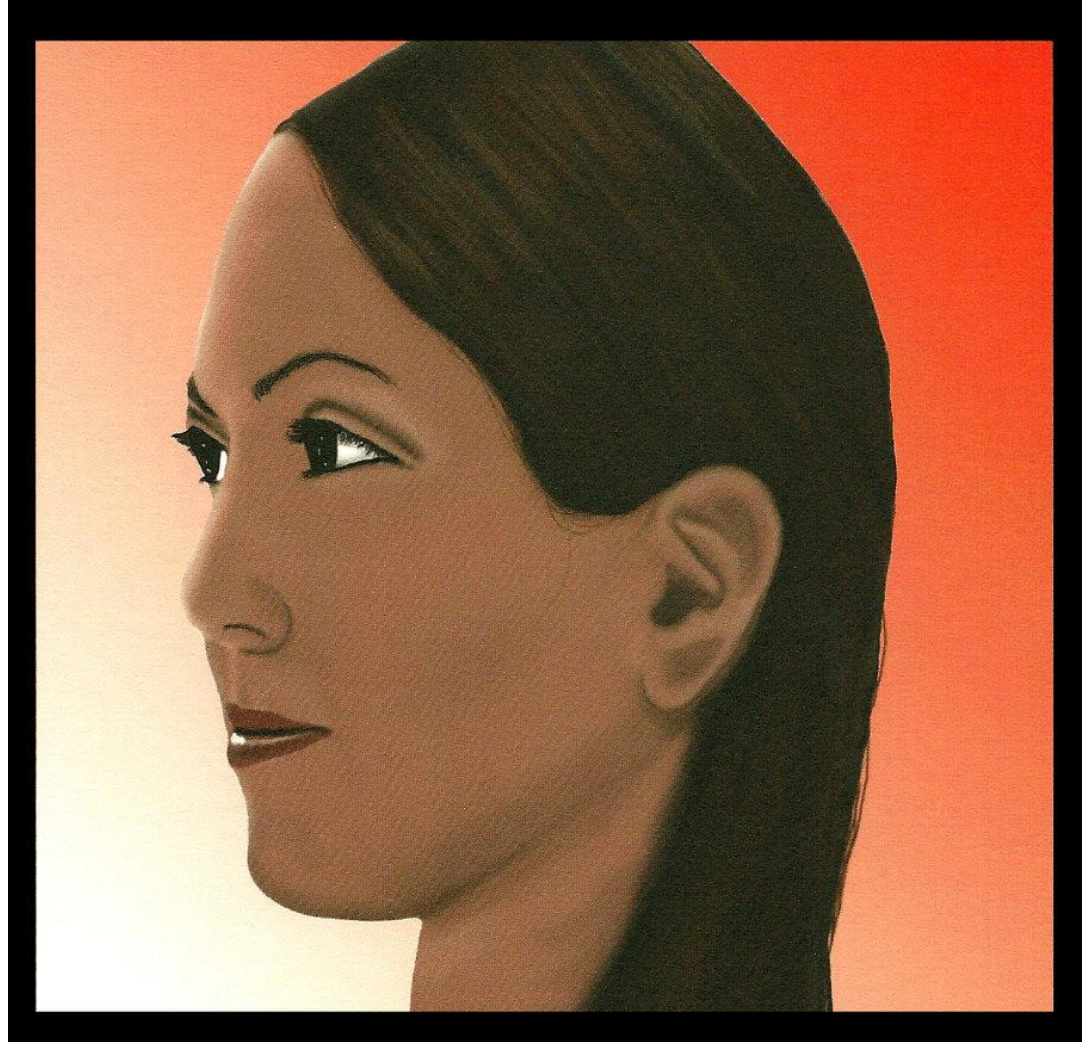
"I'm asking them to move into Texas. Texas is under the control of the Mexicans now and not the Americans. They will be safer there."



"Texas," thought Sehoy. She stared into her grandmother's eyes.

Etota understood. Perhaps they had a choice. If they could leave soon. If they could stay alive for the journey. They must tell their relatives.

"Texas, ah," Etota declared. "It will be a decision of the women,"



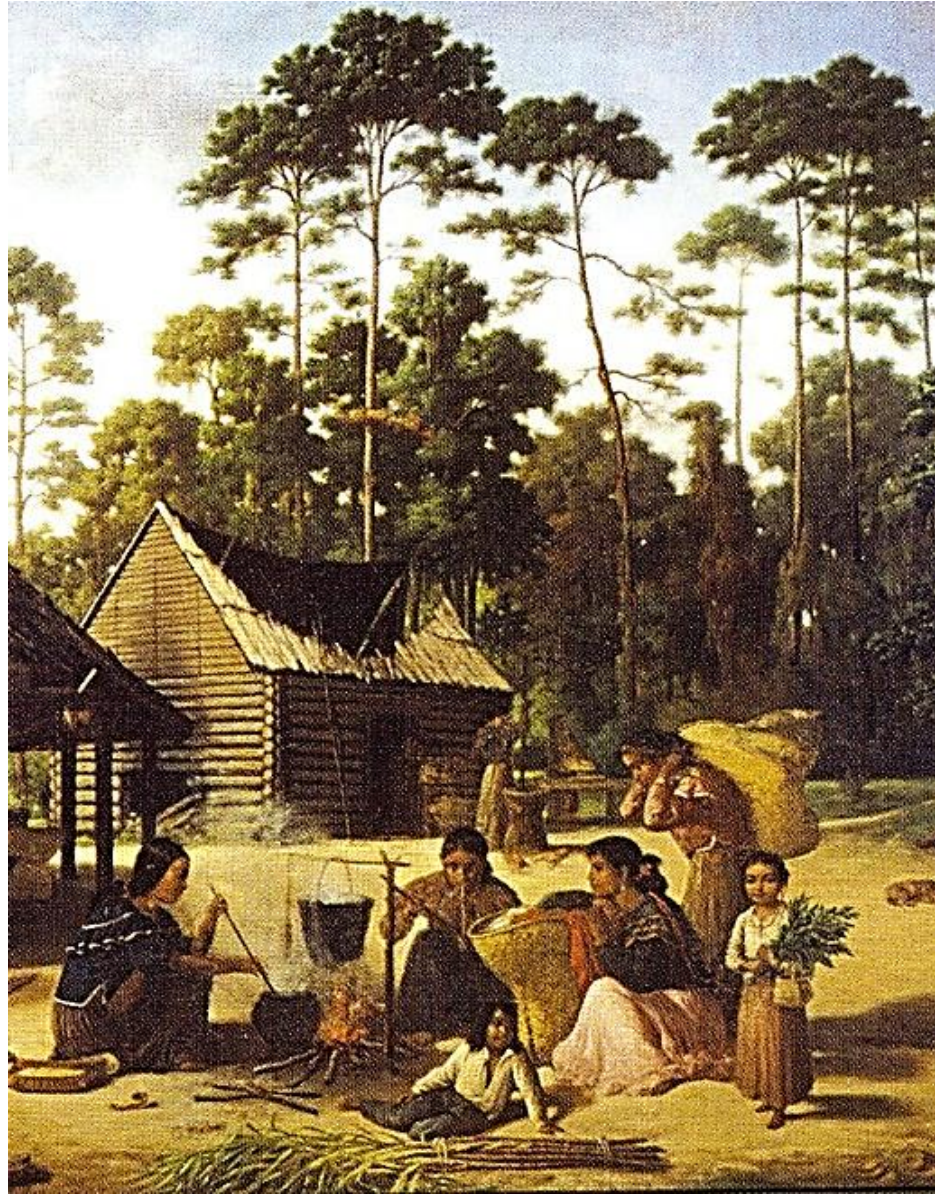
She celebrated the Green Corn Festival. It would be for the last time in her town of Okfuskee. She and members of her matriline performed the purifying ladies' dance and later brought out the leg rattles for the men in the stomp dance. For days the ritual fasts and feasts continued for thanks and forgiveness.

It was both a happy and sad time.



And all the while Sehoj and the older women of her matriline sat around the fire and talked about . . . Texas.

They felt, they *knew*, they were choosing life.



The end

Let's talk!!!