

Wilma Mankiller: A Remembrance

By Suzanne Sunshower

I remember doing a dance around my living room, pen in hand, ready to write a congratulatory note to a woman I'd never met. I had just read the news that Wilma Mankiller had been elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, and I was reeling in excitement. As I settled onto the floor to write at the coffee table (my desk seemed too stiflingly formal and my bed too casual), I felt as though I were about to write a letter to an American president. Except, I wasn't angry about anything.

For once I was writing to an elected official to express only joy, hopefulness, and encouragement, *without* any underlying (or overt) threat of protest. Although not Cherokee myself, I was genuinely pleased at Wilma Mankiller's accomplishment. I saw her new role as a 'win' for all women and a positive advancement for the Cherokee Nation. She had been triumphant in her earnest struggle for the right to lead her people, and her struggle had served to strengthen all women.

Much was made, at the time, of Wilma Mankiller being the first female chief of an Indian nation, which was then later corrected in most reports to first female Cherokee chief or first *elected* female chief. Many years later, relaxing over coffee, the Cherokee writer Allison Hedge Coke challenged my casual mention that Wilma Mankiller had been The First Female Chief, with her assertion, "Oh, there've been women chiefs before...people have just forgotten." She then reminded me of the various important political positions that women had held in American Indian nations before European habits and rules of conduct were so widely integrated and 'adopted' into tribal life. And I had to relent, of course, because it was true.

However, I submit that in the U.S., where often two steps are taken backward for each one forward, we must still hail those individuals who make the steps forward. The fact that women were politically important in past Indian societies does not make the ascendancy to Chief, of any contemporary Native American woman, less significant. Having 'forgotten' or re-written much of history in



the U.S., we citizens often find ourselves pushing against walls that have either been broken before (i.e.: Black members of congress before Jim Crow), or were never erected in our past cultural/political experiences to begin with (i.e.: cultural protections around abuse of Native women before European contact), and thus must repeat many 'firsts'. With so much 'forgotten,' or replaced history about us, each repeated push forward is still an important necessity.

Around and round we go; and higher we must climb each time to ascend the imaginary walls built from flagging consciousness in our contagious 'forgetfulness'.

The U.S. is still a young country, and has yet to break-even between the toll of its grave human (and ethical) losses and the individual/collective triumphs that have brought it to this point. As a whole, we still have no idea of all the 'forgotten' knowledge, and possible learning or turning points that we unthinkingly scrambled across over the years. Even as we have gained much as a country, much for the people has been lost or forgotten.

While Wilma Mankiller's time in office was not trouble-free, and all of her decisions made for the Cherokee Nation were not without conflict, her dedication to bettering the lives of Native people was never questioned. She set an inspiring national example of what Native American women can achieve, and became a modern role model for young Native American women all across the country. Just as time has told some of the story of Wilma Mankiller, time will tell more. As for her place in both Cherokee and U.S. histories, true to form, the twain may have to double back before it meets. But I know that I will still be dancing in her honor.

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p. 10

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