

# GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS Colloquy

Fall 2006  
Volume 7 • Number 2

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE LIBRARIES



*Wolfloven ball team, October, 1888. (ALL PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE BY JAMES MOONEY.)*

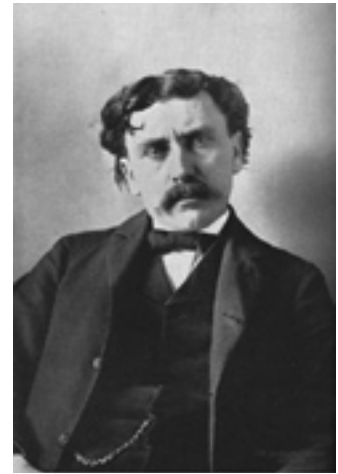
## James Mooney, among the Cherokee

“The Cherokees are undoubtedly the most important tribe in the United States, as well as one of the most interesting,” wrote ethnologist James Mooney in his 1888 article “Myths of the Cherokee,” composed after his first season studying the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. He continued, “Remaining in their native mountains, away from railroads, and progressive white civilization, they retain many customs and traditions which have been lost by those who removed to the West.” Mooney’s initial foray into the Qualla Boundary of North Carolina would be the first of many research trips, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute’s Bureau of American Ethnology. His writings, an outgrowth of his lifelong fascination with Native Americans and their culture, provided a record of Cherokee life that was rapidly fading by the 1800s.

Mooney, born in Richmond, Indiana in 1861, was a self-taught ethnologist, when the profession was still in its nascent stages. The Bureau of American Ethnology was founded in 1879 by explorer John Wesley Powell. In 1885, Mooney attracted the attention of Powell with his extensive independent work classifying the Native Americans by their languages in a document he called “Indian Synonymy.” This initial list provided a working manual for the staff of Bureau until a more comprehensive classification was compiled 1891.

During Mooney’s first summer of work at the Bureau, he met N. J. Smith, a representative of the Cherokees. Mooney was allowed to sit in on interviews with Smith and take notes on Cherokee vocabulary and grammar. Mooney asked Powell permission to pursue research on Cherokee language. Powell

*(continued on page 2)*



*James Mooney, early ethnologist of the Cherokee.*

---

*Great Smoky Mountains Colloquy* is a newsletter published by The University of Tennessee Libraries.

Co-editors:  
Anne Bridges  
Russ Clement  
Kenneth Wise

Correspondence and  
change of address:  
*GSM Colloquy*  
652 John C. Hodges Library  
The University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1000  
865/974-2359  
865/974-9242 (fax)  
Email: [smokies@utk.edu](mailto:smokies@utk.edu)  
Web: [www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/](http://www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/)



James Mooney, Ethnologist of the Cherokee, continued



agreed, authorizing Mooney's first field trip in summer of 1887. As well as studying the Cherokee language, Mooney was instructed to collect information on religious practices, customs, and arts.

Intrigued by traditional medical practices, Mooney began his work by learning the names and uses of medicinal herbs used by the shamans, Cherokee spiritual and physical healers. Alarmed by the high mortality rate among the Eastern Band, Mooney requested a medical intervention by the Bureau of Indian Affairs who sent a medical team to introduce "modern" medicine. Fearing the sacred formulas would be lost forever, Mooney moved quickly to obtain the sacred formulas recorded in the texts of shamans. Although at first the shamans were reluctant to reveal their most prized formulas to an outsider, Mooney was able to convince Swimmer Ayunini, a prominent Cherokee shaman, that translating and publishing the formulas would preserve them for future generations. Mooney worked diligently throughout his life to translate and organize the formulas. Although Mooney wrote articles on Cherokee medicine and the sacred formulas, the complete Swimmer manuscript was not published until 1932 when Franz Olbrechts, a noted anthropologist who followed Mooney in studying the Cherokee, finished the work began by Mooney in the *99<sup>th</sup> Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin* in 1932.

As in addition to the medical formulas, Mooney was intrigued by other Cherokee traditions. He collected Cherokee myths which he organized into four categories, 1. animal stories, 2. sacred myths, 3. local legends, and 4. historical traditions. Many of the myths

were supplied by Swimmer while additional myths were related by other tribal elders. The sacred myths which cover subjects like creation of the world and the origin of life and death are essential to our understanding of the Cherokee world view. Mooney published the myths in the *19<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* in 1900.

Other aspects of Cherokee life drew Mooney's attention. He studied and wrote on Cherokee ball games, mound building, plant lore, names, river cult, and alphabets. In his second field season in 1888, he arrived with a camera to better document life among the Cherokee. The ball game with its attending rituals and dance caught his interest in particular. The sport which is common in its variations among Native Americans, resembled lacrosse, using both a netted stick and ball. The evening before the game, each opposing team held a dance within their community. Along with other food tabus, the ball players did not eat from the time that the dance began until the game was over the next day. Mooney wrote that "the measured beat of the Indian drum fell upon the ear, and soon we saw the figures of the dancers outlined against the firelight, while the soft voices of the women as they sang the chorus of the ball songs mingled their plaintive cadences with the shouts of the men." During the day of the game, the players walked to the field with their shaman, stopping frequently to partake of water rituals. Upon their arrival at the field, the shaman scratched each player with a kanuga or short comb with seven teeth, seven being a sacred number of the Cherokee, made from splintered turkey bones. Several hundred people attended the games, meeting before the contest to wager goods on the outcome. Finally the game began, with Mooney describing the action as "a combination of base ball, football, and the old-fashioned shinny. Almost everything short of murder is allowable in the game.... Serious accidents are common." After the game, the players again "go to water" in rituals designed to eliminate the effects of the incantations offered by the opposing team.

Mooney extended his research on Native Americans to include field work and publications on the Kiowa and the Cheyenne as well as other groups in the Great Plains. Upon his death in 1921, he was the recognized authority on the Cherokee and Kiowa, having recorded for all generations their traditional ways of life. The ethnologists and anthropologist of the Smithsonian memorialized Mooney with a resolution calling his knowledge of Native Americans "unsurpassed" and "a source of inspiration to his colleagues and associates."

TOP TO BOTTOM: Tagwadibi; Ayasta; Walini; Swimmer Ayunini, Cherokee "shaman"

For more information on Mooney, see:

Moses, L. G. *The Indian Man: A Biography of James Mooney*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

"James Mooney." [obituary] *American Anthropologist*. New Series, v. 24, no. 2 (1922): 209-14.

King, Duane H. "James Mooney, Ethnologist." *Journal of Cherokee Studies, Special Issue, A Tribute to James Mooney, Cherokee Ethnologist*, v. 7, no. 1 (1982): 4-8. This issue includes reprints of several articles by Mooney.

## Mooney on the Web

Visit the new "Cherokee Resources Guide" on the UT Libraries webpages at [www.lib.utk.edu/refs/cherokee](http://www.lib.utk.edu/refs/cherokee) for PDF versions of several James Mooney articles and links to information on the Cherokee.

## Cades Cove and Abrams Creek: Legacy of the Cherokee?

There has long been dispute in the annals of Smoky Mountain lore concerning the origin of the name "Cades Cove." One tradition contends that Cades Cove was named for Chief Kade, a Cherokee and little-known successor to Old Abram of Chilhowee, who himself was a warrior chief famous for leading the Cherokee against the Watauga settlement.

Old Abram, along with Chief Old Corn Tassel, Chief Hanging Maw, and three other Cherokee warriors, were tomahawked to death in 1788 by a man named Kirk in revenge for the massacre of his family at Nine Mile in the present Blount County, Tennessee. This Kirk is reputed to be the son of John Kirk, a soldier who served with Colonial John Sevier during the Revolution.

Old Abram's Mohawk wife, Kate, their daughter, and several Cherokee women were spared Kirk's tomahawk. Old Abram's legacy as an honored leader of his people was memorialized in the name Abrams Creek, a large stream that runs through the bottom land of Cades Cove. According to some accounts, Kate's name also survives in the derivation "Cades" and thus in remembrance as "Cades Cove."

## New on the Smokies Bookshelf

Charles Frazier. *Thirteen Moons*. NY: Random House, 2006. 422 p.



William Holland Thomas:  
The real Will Turner?

“So the lesson that the map taught was that knowledge has strict limits, and beyond that verge the world itself might become equally unspecified and provisional,” mused young Will Turner as he headed into uncharted Cherokee territory for the first time in Charles Frazier’s second novel, *Thirteen Moons*.

With a setting firmly in the Blue Ridge/Smokies region of North Carolina, Turner makes his way in the world in a classic heroic journey tale that shadows the life of the historic figure, William Holland Thomas. The major derivation from Thomas’s story is Turner’s mysterious love interest, Claire, who periodically appears and disappears, haunting both his dreams and consciousness.

Turner comes to Cherokee territory as a bound boy, contracted to run a store. He stays, learning to speak Cherokee like a native, building a commercial and real estate empire, and joining the Cherokee community through his adoption by Bear, a local Cherokee patriarch. The upward trajectory of Turner’s life is a distinct contrast to the fragile and deteriorating condition of the Cherokee, culminating in their forced removal in the 1838 Trail of Tears. Like the real life Thomas, Turner becomes an advocate for the Cherokee who manage to remain in North Carolina, first as a lobbyist in Washington, DC and later as a Senator.

Smokies enthusiasts will appreciate Frazier’s depictions of the wilderness mountain region and the Cherokee way of life. Of the Cherokee, Turner says that even before the removal their way of life had changed from “the companionable townships with their warm smoky townhouses and constant gossip and intrigues and friendships and quarrels and romances. Some had even forgotten their old names and went only by white sort of names, like Sam Johnson or John Samson.” In further thinking about the role of the white people as “victors,” he comments that “a few rivers and creeks and coves seem to be resistant to our ownership. They persist in holding on to their old names even into the present. Unfortunately, hardly any of the mountains have kept their real names, which is understandable since they make such grand ways to commemorate our dead politicians.” Through historic detail and thoughtful descriptions, *Thirteen Moons* enriches our understanding in this critical frontier period of the Smokies region.

## An 1886 Trip to the Smokies Now on the Web

The Great Smoky Mountains Regional Project is pleased to announce the availability of the William Cox Cochran Great Smoky Mountains Photographic Collection. Cochran, an Ohio lawyer and trustee of Oberlin College, captured the 89 images in this collection while on a trip to East Tennessee in August 1886. The photographs consist largely of images of people and landmarks in and around what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The photographic images were donated by Miss Mary Rudd Cochran, daughter of W.C. Cochran, to the University of Tennessee Library in 1959.

The Cochran Collection, along with other Smokies digital collections, can be seen at: [www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/digcoll.html](http://www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/digcoll.html).



*Dorsey's cabin in Middle Fork of the Little River. Photograph by William Cox Cochran.* (WILLIAM COX COCHRAN GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, 1886, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE)

LOOKING FOR A BACK ISSUE OF THE *COLLOQUY*? GO TO:  
[www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/colloquy.html](http://www.lib.utk.edu/smokies/colloquy.html)



*GSM Colloquy*

652 John C. Hodges Library  
The University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1000