Growing Up Indian in a Southern Context

Reminiscing about childhood memories can be both a pleasurable and painful exercise—one that is indulgent and cathartic. The contributors of this first chapter offer us access to some of their lives’ defining moments that are deeply personal and, in most cases, being shared publicly for the first time. There was no particular formula or prescribed process from which these personal essays were collected, so they each take on their own unique style and points of emphasis. Collectively, however, they set the stage for subsequent chapters by offering some insight into the important roles of family, culture, and place in the lives of southern Native peoples—many of whom grew up within the context of a racially polarized region that had a profound impact on them.

The pieces within this chapter are more than simple childhood memories. They offer tribute and respect to the authors’ ancestors—both from the distant and more recent past. Those earlier generations sacrificed and persevered in order to lay the foundation for their descendants to carry on their cultural lifeways, knowledge, and connection to their homeland. Nanette Sconiers Pupalaikis manages to capture this beautifully in her piece, “The Ballad of the Choctawhatchee River: Ripples from Our Past,” through her reminiscing about her Muscogee Creek grandmother’s teachings about the importance of the Choctawhatchee River to “their history and their soul.” This essay shares an important message that resonates throughout this collection, that although some history
and knowledge have been lost over time, Indigenous identity—much like the river—has withstood the test of time.

This resilience is often attributed to the role that grandmothers and mothers played—and continue to play—as matriarchs, protectors, and teachers. In fact, Stan Cartwright, in “Muscogee Lifeways in Central Georgia,” credits his great-grandmother for having the most influence on his life through the healing knowledge and lessons that she passed on. Similarly, Patricia Easterwood, in “My Family’s Legacy,” and Wanda Light Tully, in “Hiding My Indian Identity,” both identify the strength and wisdom of their grandmothers who, like many southern Indian people, were forced to hide their identities from outsiders as a way of protecting themselves. In fact, family, in general, played an important role within an isolated and precarious time, often captured in vivid childhood memories.

Just as much as family and place were significant factors in shaping the context from which southern Indian people grew up in the early to mid-twentieth century, so was the region’s race-based political and social structure. Native peoples’ experiences were influenced by their location and relationships with surrounding non-Indian communities. Sometimes this meant that they were among friends and supporters, while other times their relationships were defined by instances of discrimination and hostility. Examples range from the Houma of Louisiana encountering “No Indians Allowed” signs in local stores to the nationally publicized case of the Lumbee of North Carolina breaking up a nearby Ku Klux Klan rally in 1958. As difficult as these overt acts of hatred were to address, the role that Jim Crow played on the ability—or inability—of Indian children to gain an education seemed to have the biggest impact of all.

In most areas of the South, Indian children were forbidden admission to white schools. As a result, their choices were limited to not attending school at all, attending black schools, or establishing their own “third-tier” schools, often with the help of missionaries or local school boards, or by tapping into federal Indian funds. The Indian
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schools, however, were often poorly funded and limited the years of instruction to grammar school, which forced many Indian children to have to complete their education by traveling long distances to Indian boarding schools or integrated schools in other states.4 “Growing up MOWA Choctaw,” by Chief Framon Weaver of the MOWA Choctaw of Alabama, and “The Sacrifices We Made for Our Education,” by Chief Kenneth Adams of the Upper Mattaponi of Virginia, together offer a powerful message on the impact that the South’s segregated school system had on Indian families and communities. In both cases, Baptist churches had a hand in the development of Indian grammar schools, as well as the facilitation of helping Indian children leave home to gain access to high schools. Sending their children away to be cared for by strangers was extremely difficult for Indian families; however, as Weaver points out, the sacrifice was worth it because the first generation of educated people to return back to his community became teachers, business people, and community leaders.

Following the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, and the subsequent movement toward school desegregation, it became clear that southern Indian communities that developed their own schools were divided on the issue. While some communities, such as the Poarch Creek of Alabama and the Four Holes community in South Carolina, celebrated the closures of their dilapidated Indian schools, others, such as the Lumbee, fought to keep their separate schools that served as community centers and important symbols of identity.5 Despite the position that any given community took on the issue, and as Chief Kenneth Adams demonstrates in his essay, the desegregation period proved to be a tough transition for those Native people who were often on the front lines of the process. In fact, this is the very same point echoed by Charles “Chuckie” Verdin, author of “Showdown at Bayou Point-aux-Chien,” who was among the first group of Indian children in Terrebonne Parish, located in southern Louisiana, to encounter severe resistance as they were positioned to desegregate the local white school.

The demographics of the schools may have shifted with the decline
of Jim Crow; yet the challenges of racism that many southern Indian people experienced remained and, in some cases, even took on a new dimension. In the next two essays, “Racism in New Brockton, Alabama,” by Nancy Wright Carnley of the MaChis Lower Creek, and “One Poarch Creek Family’s Educational Journey over Three Generations,” collectively compiled by the Martin family, we are given a glimpse into how race impacted—and continues to impact—these authors. From relationships with the local non-Indian communities that are based on confusion or hatred, to educational experiences filled with bullying or misinformed teachers and classmates, these multigenerational reflections offer valuable snapshots of journeys still in motion.

With each new generation come new challenges as well as triumphs. This chapter ends with Ernest Sickey’s “We Will Forever Remain Coushatta and We Will Always Be Here” because the message it conveys permeates this entire collection. Like other southern Indian communities, the Coushatta of Louisiana were economically marginalized and suffered from a high level of unemployment. Uniquely, however, their circumstances were further exacerbated when the federal government unofficially terminated them as an Indian tribe in the 1950s. Instead of buckling under the pressures of their circumstances—and defying the predictions of academics that they would disappear—the Coushatta persevered. At the heart of their endurance were community and culture, as well as the ability to exercise some agility as the social and political environment shifted.

From the early years that are represented within the contributions that comprise this chapter to the most recent reflections, one thing is certain: the context in which southern Native people are coming of age today is very different from what it once was. This is, indeed, a good thing. However, as narratives reflecting the childhoods of younger generations deviate from the experiences of isolation, poverty, and racial discrimination, it is imperative that we do not forget what once was and that we continue to celebrate and honor the sacrifices and work of those who laid the foundation for southern Indian people today.
The Ballad of the Choctawhatchee River: Ripples from Our Past

Some of the great days of my youth were spent on the Choctawhatchee River with my grandmother. When I tired of fishing—because Elma Groce never did—I would hop off onto a sandbar to run wild and free until she returned for me. We traveled up and down the river fishing all of her favorite spots. Grandmother loved the river like some women adore fine jewelry. Of course, she never wore jewelry, makeup, or even perfume that I remember. I often observed as she plunged her arms into the muddy water to wash her hands after unhooking a fish. Sometimes she sat a minute longer watching as the river flowed and sparkled through her fingers. As I grew older, I realized that the river was like an old friend, and if it had been possible, she would have spent everyday fishing it. It seems many folks in our community hold more than a fondness for the Choctawhatchee River. It is not only an element of their livelihood but a part of their history and their soul.

Elma Groce fishing on the Choctawhatchee River. (Photo Courtesy of Nanette Sconiers Pupalaikis.)
Grandmother pointed out every bend, slough, and lake, and I can still hear her call them by name: Chapman Lake, Blue Hole, Powell Lake, Warehouse Slough, Curry Lake, French Fish Hole, and Horse Shoe Lake. She noted what the current carried along—foam or driftwood—thus predicting whether the river was rising or falling. She paid attention to the clouds and wildlife in order to surmise the weather. She loved to see birds migrate in the spring and fall, and she always knew what flocks were coming and going. Alligators eased off sunny logs to slip quietly into the water, and great blue herons lumbered lazily skyward to find another fishing spot. Deer, turkeys, wild boar, and other animals wandered cautiously to the river’s edge, and Elma Groce watched them with tenderness—she knew every tree along the bank and every birdsong.

I sat on her boat and listened to stories of long-gone days. She spoke in simple terms about the complex history of the river—ferry routes, political doings, sober days of trouble, old farm sites and gristmills, the location of a wrecked steamboat, pulp wooding, and the logjam near her favorite boat ramp. She well remembered the coldest winters and the hottest summers, the long days working in cotton fields, and the first dance with the love of her life, Floyd Groce. “In those days folks would celebrate after raising a new barn or harvesting their fields. Some men played fiddles and others played their guitars, and your grandpa and I danced on peanut hulls.” Her stories were amusing and always down-to-earth real. Elma Groce was an intelligent woman who had a deep perception of people and life. She awakened with the sun and hastened to the bait bed. I remember the cardinals singing at dawn and Grandmother insisting that even the redbird was calling, hurry up!

There were days when we watched as a heavy fog rolled down the river or we would sit out a thunderstorm because Grandmother knew it would pass quickly and there were hours of daylight left to catch the fish. She was not easily daunted or discouraged by thunderheads or slow bites. The days were warm and long. She always greeted other fishermen—exchanging friendly words about their luck that day or their family’s health. Then they pulled away slowly so as not to churn up the water and spoil her spot. She read the river like some people read a book, always keeping a watchful eye out for snags. Sometimes we made excursions through the backwaters in search of the best fishing place—which changed now and then due to a hard rain upstream. She spoke of everything from her earliest childhood memories...