

**Slave descendants fight to stay**

**in Cherokee tribe**

A person holding a picture of her family

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In this Oct. 6, 2011, photo, Rena Logan, a member of a Cherokee Freedmen family, holds a picture of her grandfather, grandmother and mother while her daughter and granddaughter sit at her home in Muskogee, Okla.

**By Justin Juozapavicius /Associated Press**

TAHLEQUAH, Okla. — Charlene White didn't learn the whole story about her grandfather's secret number until she was 12. Prior to that time, she knew only that he had scrawled the mysterious digits — 3489 — on a crumpled piece of paper and hidden it in a drawer.

The number was assigned to him as a boy to indicate that members of his family had once been slaves to the Cherokee Nation. It seemed to be a piece of personal history best left in the past.

"I feel like he felt it was shameful being known as a slave, especially a slave of the Indians," White said. "It was an embarrassment."

More than a century after her father got the number, White is telling the story of her ancestors' servitude as she fights along with 2,800 other descendants of Indian slaves across the country to be embraced as full members of the tribe.

Just as many white Americans owned black slaves until after the Civil War, so did some Cherokee tribesmen. The practice generally ended with an 1866 treaty that afforded freed slaves the same rights as native Cherokees.

But leaders of the Cherokee Nation, one of the largest and most influential American tribes, have been trying to change that policy by declaring that the descendants should not be considered Cherokee citizens unless they can show proof of Indian blood.

The descendants stand to lose part of their identity if the tribe is successful in removing them. In 2007, more than three-quarters of Cherokee citizens voted to kick out descendants of freedmen and other non-Indians. The dispute has been in and out of the courts ever since.

Loss of citizenship could also mean losing valuable tribal benefits such as medical care, housing assistance and grocery stipends.

"They're treating us like we're still their slaves," White said. "That is so degrading."

Voting is under way in the tribal election for chief, with the final ballots to be cast Saturday. The two candidates have battled for months over almost every aspect of the tribal government. But they find common ground on the freedmen issue: Both want them booted.

Tribal leaders say it is their right as a sovereign nation to determine who qualifies to be a citizen.

"I have considered the Cherokee Nation's right to determine their own national identity the most fundamental right of every government," said Chad Smith, the incumbent chief, who is being challenged by longtime tribal councilman Bill John Baker.

The descendants say being Cherokee has always been part of their family stories, even if they were not actively involved with the tribe after their relatives were released.

White was born and raised in Tahlequah, the capital of the 300,000-member Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma.

Her grandfather, Clarence Wilson, was 13 when he received his number from a document known as the Freedmen's Roll. It was 1902, just five years before Oklahoma became a state, when segregationist Jim Crow laws were taking a firm grip on the territory.

Wilson had not been eager to share the family's story, White said. He didn't want his kids to think they were any different than their classmates. And he feared that knowledge of the number, like the ones tattooed on Jews by the Nazis, would brand his household, potentially inviting angry whites to lynch them or kick them off their land.

When she was 12, White learned the whole ugly story: Wilson's grandmother had been a slave of a Cherokee who traveled the Trail of Tears — the perilous trek taken by thousands of American Indians in the 1830s after they were forced from their homelands in the Southeast.

"I didn't understand the meaning that my grandfather had a roll number," White recalls.

Now in her 60s, White suffers from glaucoma and cataracts that have stolen much of her eyesight, and she needs new glasses every four months or so. She uses special eye drops that cost $80. All those medical benefits are provided by the tribe, for now.

The freedmen families' struggle for citizenship can be compared to "a latent civil rights struggle," said Carla Pratt, a law professor at Pennsylvania State University who has studied the freedmen issue for several years. The key question, Pratt asks, is "What does a slaveholding nation owe to the people it has enslaved?"

"Part of the reason people are still dependent on these services is because they are the descendants of slaves, who have been denied the opportunity of intergenerational wealth," she said.

In deciding a person's identify, the tribe relies on a historical record called the Dawes Rolls, which were created by the federal government between 1898 and 1906 to identify citizens of the Cherokee Nation — and members of other tribes — who were living in Indian territory.

The roll has two parts. The first, called the Cherokees-by-Blood Roll, identified about 32,000 citizens of the nation who could prove direct Indian ancestry. The second, known as the Freedmen Roll, identified about 5,000 freedmen citizens of the nation, typically black former slaves and their descendants owned by Cherokee tribesmen.

The freedmen families have argued that the Treaty of 1866, signed decades before the Dawes Rolls were written, takes precedent. That treaty between the U.S. government and the Cherokees gave the freedmen and their descendants "all the rights of native Cherokees."

Until a court rules otherwise, the Cherokee Nation is still offering medical care to descendants of freedmen. Of the $300 million the tribe budgets for health care, medical services for the descendants cost about 1 percent, or $3 million, a tribal spokesman said.

Rena Logan, a retired cook from Muskogee who keeps her ancestors' Freedmen Roll number of 3918 close to her heart every day, gets treatment at tribal clinics for her arthritis, hypertension, osteoarthritis and a dislocated back disc.

"We are black, and we were slaves, and they want to keep us that way," Logan said. "It really hurts the heart. What did we do to be discriminated against?"