

The Wind Is My Mother, excerpt from Chapter 1

When I was just three days old, my mother took me to a hill top near our home and introduced me to the elements. First she introduced me to the Four Directions -- East, South, West and North. "I'm asking special blessings for this child. You surround our lives and keep us going. Please protect him and bring balance into his life."

Then she touched my tiny feet to this Mother Earth. "Dear Mother, Grandmother Earth, one day this child will walk, play and run on you. I will try to teach him to have respect for you as he grows up. Wherever he may go, please be there supporting and taking care of him."

I was introduced to the sun: "Grandfather Sun, shine upon this child as he grows. Let every portion of his body be normal and strong in every way, not only physically but mentally. Wherever he is, surround him with your warm, loving energy. We know that there will be cloudy days in his life, but you are always constant and shining -- please shine through to this child and keep him safe at all times."

She lifted me up to be embraced by the breeze as she spoke to the wind: "Please recognize this child. Sometimes you will blow strong, sometimes you'll be very gentle, but let him grow up knowing the value of your presence at all times as he lives upon this planet."

Next I was introduced to the water. "Water, we do not live without you, water is life. I ask that this child never know thirst."

She put some ashes on my forehead, saying, "Fire, burn away the obstacles of life for this child. Make the way clear so that he will not stumble in walking a path of learning to love and respect all of life."

And that night, I was introduced to the full moon and the stars. These elements were to watch over me as I grew up, running around on the carpet of grass that my

Mother and Grandmother Earth provided, breathing in the air that sustains life and flows within my body, taking away all the toxins as I exhaled.

I had a sense of belonging as I grew up because of my people's relationship with these elements, and I imagine that's why most of our people related to the environment so easily. We recognized a long time ago that there was life all around us -- in the water, in the ground, in the vegetation. Children were introduced to the elements so that as we grew up, we were not looking down upon nature or looking up to nature. **We felt a part of nature, on the same level. We respected each blade of grass, one leaf on a tree among many other leaves, everything.**

My name is *Nokus Feke Ematha Tustanaki* -- in your language it means "Bear Heart." I'm also known as Marcellus Williams and I was born in the state of Oklahoma in 1918.

My tribe is Muskogee and we originally lived along the waterways of what is now Georgia and Alabama. The Europeans who eventually settled in that area didn't know of us as Muskogeeans, they simply referred to us by our habitat, "The Indians who live by the creeks." The name prevailed, so we are commonly known as Creek Indians, but in fact we are the Muskogee Nation.

In 1832, President Andrew Jackson signed an order to remove the native tribes from the southeastern United States and during that time the Muskogee were moved along with the Chickasaws, Choctaws and Cherokees. We walked all the way from our homes to "Indian territory," which later became "Oklahoma" -- that's a Choctaw word meaning "land of the red man." History has recorded that removal, but never once have the emotions been included in that record-- what our people felt, what they had to leave behind, the hardships they had to endure.

The removal was forced, we were given no choice. When our people refused to leave their homes, soldiers would wrench a little child from the arms of its mother and

bash its head against a tree, saying, "Go or we'll do likewise to all the children here." It's said that some of the soldiers took their sabers and would slash pregnant women down the front, cut them open. That's how our people were forced from their homeland.

Our people walked the entire distance, from sunup to sundown, herded along by soldiers on horseback. When our old people died along the way, there was no time allowed to give them a decent burial -- many of our loved ones were left in ravines, their bodies covered with leaves and brush because our people were forced to go on. It was a long walk, people got very tired and the young children could not keep up with the adults so people would carry them, handing them back and forth. But they didn't have the endurance to carry them all the time so some children and their mothers had to be left behind. Those are just some of the hardships our people endured on that walk and out of those injustices came much lamenting and crying, so our people called it "The Trail of Tears."

I knew a man who went on that long walk as a child and he told me about it. At one point the people and the few horses they had were put on twelve dilapidated ferry boats to cross the Mississippi River. The ferry started sinking so he grabbed his little sister, got on a horse and headed for shore, all the while chased by soldiers who didn't want him riding. He was trying to hurry but the horse had to swim and was frightened from the commotion so it was slow going. He had seen how brutal the soldiers could be and how the ferries were intentionally overloaded to make them sink, so he was making a break for his life. Someone came up behind him on another horse and grabbed his sister. "I was crying when I got to the shore," he said, "because I thought the soldiers took my sister, but I found out later one of my own people had helped me out."

Many of our people died crossing the Mississippi. When the survivors got across the river, many were soaked from swimming and it was freezing cold. One old woman,

confused and exhausted from the ordeal, had no idea where she was -- she thought she was back home and started giving instructions to the young ones. "Follow that trail and where it forks there's some dry sticks on the ground. Gather them and build a fire to warm the people." She remembered where to find fire wood at home and, in her own mind, she thought she was there. Surely she wished she was there.

My great grandmother was on that forced march. No matter what kind of weather, they had to go on and, walking in the snow without any shoes, her feet froze. Gangrene set in and her feet literally dropped from her legs. She's buried at Fort Gibson, Oklahoma but there's no name on those markers, just many, many crosses where our people died without recognition. I don't know where her grave is, but she's there among them.

Even after we were settled, that was not the end of our problems. Our children were taken from their parents and forced to go to boarding school where they were not allowed to speak their native tongues -- they had to speak English. And the boarding school was a government school so they had to march to and from class, make up their beds, do everything as if it were a military camp. This was forced upon our young children. Native people took pride in their long hair but the children had to have their hair cut short. Sometimes the administrators would just put a bowl over a child's head and cut around it, then they would laugh at the child.

Those are just some of the things that we endured. And yet today in our ceremonies, many of our people still pray for all mankind, whether they be black, yellow, red or white. How is it possible, with a background like that among our people, to put out such love?

I grew up in the country three miles west of what is now Okemah, Oklahoma. The Creeks didn't live on reservations when they were settled in Indian territory -- each member of our tribe was given 180 acres by the government and my family lived on my

mother's original allotment. My mother was nearing the end of her child bearing years when I came on the scene so there was quite an age gap between my brothers and sisters and I. As a result, I had no close brothers to play, hunt and get into all kinds of mischief with. I more or less grew up alone with my father and mother and got into mischief by myself.

My family thought I was going to be a singer at one time. My older brother even had a conservatory of music picked out for me, but because he had it chosen it for me, I didn't want to go. I wanted to do my own choosing, do what I felt good about. I guess I was just a little rascal from a very early age, always trying to do my own thing and make up my own mind. I didn't want to be "little brother."

I attended a country school about a mile and a half from home and walked to school every day until I got a Shetland pony and rode. I used to ride horses all the time and loved to practice the trick riding I saw in the rodeo. Some days I'd come back from school standing up on the horse who'd be just galloping away. My mother used to get after me, "You're going to fall off some time." I just said, "I'll probably hurt myself, won't I?" Next time, I'd be riding backwards on the horse, or else I'd be galloping along and I'd jump off and hit the ground at a run, hanging on to the saddle horn. The momentum of that would lift me up and over to the other side of the horse. I saw the trick riders in the rodeo do something called the barrel roll where they'd go under the horse and come up on the other side while the horse was still running. I practiced that out in the cotton field and I hit the dirt many times but eventually I got it down and was able to do it.

All the farm kids worked a lot and were strong but somehow I was able to get everybody else down and was considered the best wrestler in school. I used to run everywhere. I went out for track and practiced running through the corn field without touching a stalk, just darting back and forth. We lived three miles from Okemah and when I went to town I'd jump off the porch and start running and never stop until I got

there -- then I'd run back. One time my father found an iron pipe on the side of the road which had fallen off a truck -- probably on its way to one of the many oil fields being built around Okemah. The pipe just fit between the forks of two trees in front of our house so we put it across and I tied a rope to it. I used to climb that rope with my hands, up and down, up and down.

In addition to giving those horses a lot of exercise, I would feed the hogs and chickens, tend the vegetable garden, milk the cow and help my mother churn the milk into butter. There's never a good time to milk a cow. When I milked in summer the cow would swish its tail to get the flies away and hit me across the face. And no matter how cold it was I'd still milk.

We had a smokehouse where we cured hams and salted down pork and I remember bumblebees taking over the inside of that smokehouse one time. My dad took part of a roof shingle only as wide as his hand and, without a shirt on, walked into the smokehouse and shooed all the bumblebees out of there. I don't know why he didn't get stung because he was not a medicine man who had the power to protect himself. He just had a lot of guts -- he was that kind of a man. I was quite in awe of what he did so I found some wasps living in the hole of a tree and I stuck my finger in there and let them sting me, then I took the stingers out. It hurt for a while, kind of like getting a shot, but I got used to it. Sometimes I'd catch wasps and remove their stingers then hold them and have wasps all over my hand. People didn't know they had no stingers so they'd be really impressed. I guess I was about 10 then.

I used to do crazy things. One day one of my school buddies wanted to trade sandwiches with me -- my mom used to make me good meat sandwiches and my friend only had a bologna sandwich but I traded with him anyway. I ate the bologna but first I pulled off the skin and saved it. On the way home I cut off part of that skin, wet it down then pasted it on my face so it looked like a long scar. When I went home, my

mother was quite alarmed, crying out, "Oh, Chebon!" [son] and throwing her arms around me. When I pulled it off, she tried to scold me but she was laughing too hard.

I was told to always come home before dark but once, when I was around six or seven, I went to my neighbors and got to playing with the neighbor boy -- we were having so much fun it was already dark when I got back. I went to my dad and said, "I'm sorry, I forgot your warning about being home before dark." He felt he had to back up his word so he took a strap, folded it and whacked me once. It wasn't too hard but I felt bad that I caused the father I adored so much to whip me so I went to my room and cried myself to sleep.

A few days later I overheard my mother telling my older sister what had happened. She said that during the night my dad had cried too, saying, "He came and told me and I still whipped him. I should have accepted his apology." He hardly slept that night but he had to back up his words so that whenever he told me something I would listen. I think it hurt him more than it hurt me because I soon forgot about it. But it made me more cautious after that about overstepping the boundaries he set for me.

Even though he never gave up practicing our traditional ways, my dad was a Christian and very knowledgeable in the Bible. He'd often read a scripture to me and then ask, "What do you think this means?" I was only nine years old then, but it made me think.

He read me the story of Noah sending a raven out from the ark to see if there was any land nearby but the raven never came back. Then he sent a dove and the dove brought back an olive branch -- that's why you always see the dove with an olive branch in its beak. "That's a good story, but what do you think about that? What does it mean?"

I answered that there are two kinds of people. One kind, when asked to do something, will start out to do it and then go off and get interested in something else. They just go their own way. But then there are others who will think it is a privilege to be asked and they'll want to satisfy the person who asked them as well as themselves by working at the task until it's done -- like the dove that came back.

He just nodded his head and never said, "Right" or "Wrong," because he wasn't particularly interested in the answer, he just wanted to see my logic, how I was putting things together. That's what he was teaching.

My mother was a very dedicated Christian and most of her activity outside our home was centered around the all-Indian Greenleaf Baptist Church. She was one of the leaders of its women's organization and was kind of the backbone of the church, yet she would still work in some of our Indian ways. When the women of the church had a meeting, she had them fast before and during their meetings, then they would eat together afterwards. She told me that fasting is a way of connecting to the Great Spirit -- they fasted so that there would be no distraction from discussing the spiritual aspects of church activities.

I had also heard my parents say our people came to know things by fasting. When I was 10 years old I still could not read Creek even though I could speak it fluently so I decided to fast and ask the Creator to help me learn to read. I took a Creek song book out into the woods and looked closely at the words and letters as I sang. I did that several times, fasting without breakfast until 2 or 3 in the afternoon and that's how I learned to read the Creek language. It was easy.

My mother was quite a talker, too, and wouldn't hesitate to address the men and let it be known what was needed in the church. She organized all kinds of things -- she got the men to work picking cotton in the summer for some of the local farmers

and donate their pay to the Church. That was how the church could afford to feed all the visitors when they had big meetings.

At Christmas time she would organize a pecan sale to raise money to buy gifts for all the children of the church. After the last service on Christmas Eve a Santa Claus would come in with a sack of gifts on his back -- an Indian Santa Claus who spoke Creek! It was a very jolly time.

Planting cotton

My dad taught me to hitch a team of horses to a wagon and a plow when I was eight years old and when I was ten he gave me two acres of land, saying, "If you want to plant something, go ahead. If you don't plant anything, let it grow wild. Maybe some rabbits will come, feed upon the plant life and you can kill a rabbit to have something to eat. It's your choice." Don't let it sit idle, let it yield something -- that's what he was teaching me.