

**Hands On Tradition**  
**WALKER CALHOUN**





The focus of the OTH is old-time music as defined in our first issue — that is, "the traditional old-time fiddle, banjo, and vocal music of the southeastern United States — a musical tradition which has also spread over large portions of the west, midwest, the Ozark region, and other areas." We also stated that from time to time we would write on other forms "whose development and context in many ways parallel that of southeastern old-time music."

The traditional music of the Cherokee Indians, music that for the most part goes hand in hand with their dance traditions, is embodied in the voice of Walker Calhoun, a

Cherokee Indian from the Big Cove Community on the Qualla Reservation in western North Carolina. His singing style is very old—with subtle turns and bends, and evocative tones which bring to mind images of long-ago times when the Native Americans were the first and only people in the South that later became home to the banjo and fiddle.

On a recent visit to Walker's home we brought out our instruments and discovered that he also plays 5-string banjo in the finger-picking style favored by many old-time banjo players in that part of the country. We had a great time playing tunes like "Old Joe Clark," "Cripple Creek," and "John Henry."

But the following interview focuses on Walker's singing-to-dance-music — the music he carries with him in his heart and soul and which he passes on to the coming generations, so that it will survive.

So the reader won't be confused; when Walker talks about dances, he is also talking about songs, as all the dances had songs that went with them. In some cases the dances have not survived but the songs have.

## WHERE THE RAVENS ROOST: SONGS & CEREMONIES OF BIG COVE

by Michael Kline

As Walker Calhoun raised his gourd rattle and began to sing ancient Cherokee verses in a soft, clear voice to the shaking rhythms, a hush fell over the campfire. Walker then stood to lead 150 children in the Friendship Dance, concluding a day-long gathering of the Cherokee Challenge, a scouting program for boys and girls held throughout the summer months in Birdtown, North Carolina.

The high, lonesome strains of Walker's haunting dance song soon had the children on their feet snaking single file around the fire. Rhythms from Walker's gourd rattle connected them with a long tradition of dancing and singing that has bonded their people with one another and with this place for centuries.

As we sat under a shade tree at the gathering enjoying frybread and getting acquainted, Walker explained that the songs had been passed to him when he was a boy at local dances in his home community of Big Cove, by his half-uncle, the venerable Will West Long. A medicine man with a vast knowledge of Cherokee culture, history, letters and language, Will West Long died in 1947 at age 77. His elders were men and

women who had hidden from the soldiers during the Cherokee removal [to Oklahoma] in 1838. [See John Ehle, *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation*.] At the time of West Long's childhood two generations later, the tiny Big Cove community was still traumatized by that upheaval, as were Native American communities throughout the southeastern states.

By 1891 the Bureau of Indian Affairs had launched programs of aggressive acculturation. Cherokee children were punished for speaking their own language in local government schools. With the great chestnut blight and the deepening depression of the mid-1930s, hill farming was giving way to dependency on economic programs administered by white bureaucrats. Foundations were being laid for a tourist industry which would commercialize and distort Cherokee culture. Traditional values, language, and song were being laid aside at an alarming rate.

The pervasive influence of Christian mission churches and ten years at white boarding schools could not rid Will West Long of traditional Cherokee

beliefs and ancient customs centering on the supernatural. The ceremonies he brought virtually single-handedly into the 20th century were chanted litanies and dances of thanks honoring the animal life which sustained fragile native communities. And though Cherokee people no longer depend on the flesh and the hides of the beaver and bear for sustenance, their dances honoring these animals satisfy hungers for a sense of identity and connection with the past. The rattle, song, and dance have sustained Cherokee people through succeeding waves of difficult change.

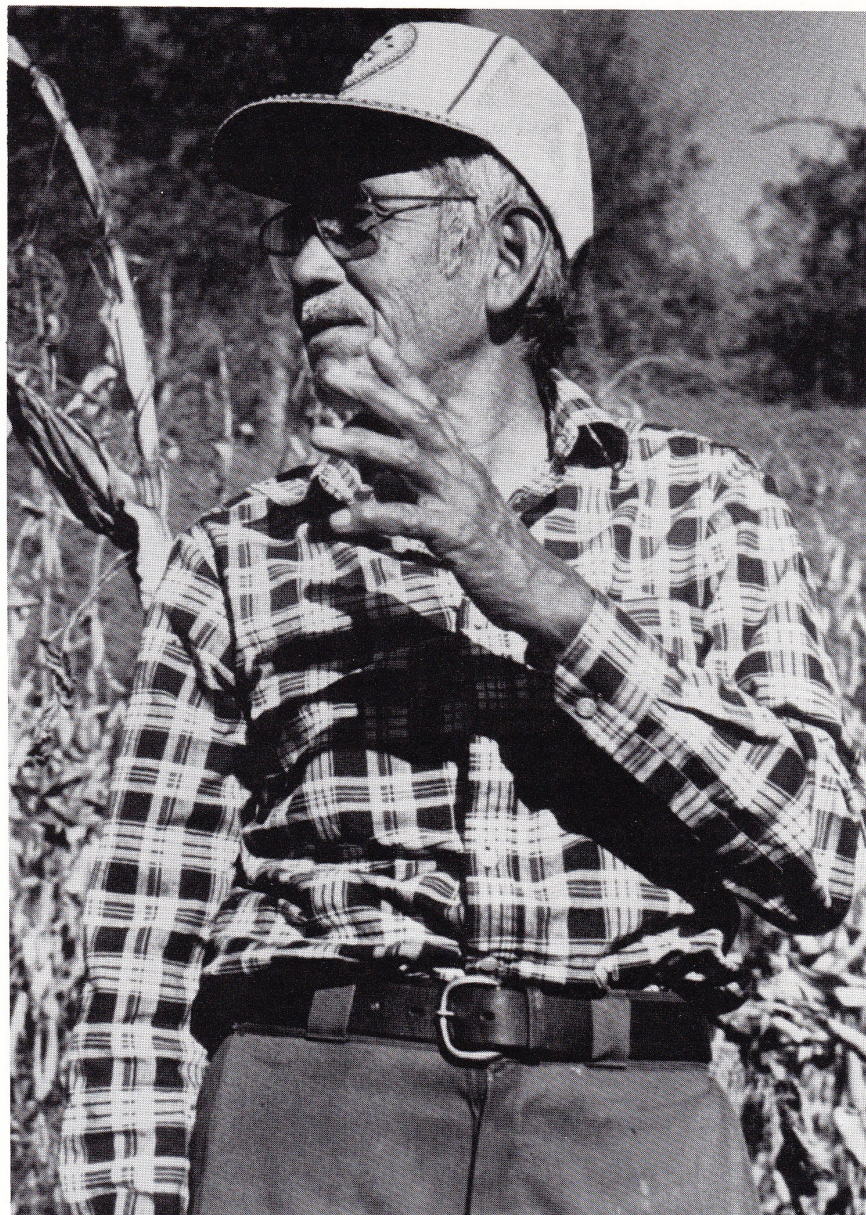
Will West Long was the good shaman, leader of his people, and driver of the dance. A hillside farmer and medicine man, he conjured for Big Cove stickball games, and preached peace and love among neighbors. So strong was his gentle leadership that his death in 1947 left a vacuum in which many of the ceremonies declined. Lloyd Sequoyah and Walker's older brother, Lawrence Calhoun, both now deceased, were among the practitioners who followed. Somehow the ceremonies persisted, if not always flourishing.



Walker's father, Morgan Calhoun, kept an old factory made banjo around the house, probably ordered from a Sears catalog. (Other Big Cove families kept banjos—mostly the neighbors played house to house.) His favorite tune was "Shoo Fly," and Walker can dimly remember the drop-thumb style his dad picked.

With his father's death when Walker was nine, the banjo passed to his older brothers, Lawrence, Henry, and Lawyer. Henry was the best banjo picker in the community. The banjo hung on the wall out of young Walker's reach. The younger children (there were ten in all) were not permitted to take it down. As soon as the older boys were gone Walker was up on a chair practicing chords without unhooking the banjo. "I could play it right there on the wall," he smiles. By 1930 the family had a guitar and Walker joined in playing standards like "Redwing," "Down Yonder," and "Down in the Willow Garden." He has developed a modified three-finger picking style, sometimes using metal finger picks, but is also comfortable with the drop-thumb rapping style he remembers from his father.

Sometimes when he was alone, Walker would quietly pick some of the Cherokee melodies he knew from his song mentor, Will West Long, but he never played these for anyone else. Walker seldom sings the old mountain ballads, preferring the ceremonial dance songs in his own tongue.—M.K.



Jeff Titon

**T**he Calhoun family lives high on a hillside overlooking the Raven's Fork River where Will West Long once led dances around sacred embers of a ceremonial fire built in the center of the cove.

Walker Calhoun, whose first language is Cherokee, has been heir to these traditions of thought and song. In 1984, at the first gathering of the Eastern and Western Bands of the Cherokee, on the Cherokee fairgrounds, Walker was drafted by a local performing dance group to sing the old songs he remembered from his youth in Big Cove.

His first public performance before that assembly launched his current, active career as a ceremonial singer.

He has also kept alive practices of folk medicine locked within the Cove community. His wisdom and humility have a charismatic effect, drawing people of all ages to him.

Walker's children and grandchildren, raised in the dance traditions of Big Cove, were charter members of the Raven Rock Dancers, named in honor of a huge outcropping on the mountain high above their home, where ravens once roosted and nurtured their young.

The ensemble has fully outfitted itself in traditional regalia and now performs at a number of festivals and pow wows around the southeastern states. The Raven Rock Dancers are seen by the community as presenting the most authentic renditions of traditional Cherokee song and dance.

In recognition of his contribution to the perpetuation of Cherokee culture and customs, Walker received the first Sequoyah Award, created especially to honor him at a gathering of the Eastern and Western Bands at the Cherokee Fall Festival in October 1988. —————→



New friends and admirers from the Western Band of the Cherokee in Oklahoma have initiated an informal exchange with Walker and his family. Twice the Calhouns have gone to Oklahoma to visit and attend stomp dances, and twice an Oklahoma contingent has traveled to Big Cove to encourage the Calhoun family in reviving the stomp dance religion. Working together, they have been clearing weeds from the old dance grounds once cherished by Will West Long. Scattered ashes dug from ancient ceremonial fires around the region have been used to resanctify the Big Cove dance grounds. Oklahoma friends will return in the coming summer to join in the renewal of the stomp dance and share ancient customs surviving in both communities despite 150 years of separation.

In June, 1989 Walker was a recipient of the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award recognizing a lifetime of community cultural achievement. He formally received the award in Raleigh on June 7, 1990. The 72-year-old spiritual leader and his family of dancers symbolize the determined survival of old songs and dances that have brought people together within the hidden beauty of Big Cove for generations. Walker today is the last link between the legacy of Will West Long and the cultural development of his own children and grandchildren. His quiet commitment to these traditions assures their place in the lives of those who will come after him.



Walker and Evelyn Calhoun with 6 of their 24 grandchildren. All of these children are active in the Raven Rock Dancers. Little Patrick peeking out from under the eagle feather sings most of his grandfather's songs in Cherokee. The family's commitment to the traditions of song and dance assure that they will be carried on.

The following excerpts were transcribed and edited from a taped conversation on March 7, 1989, the day after Walker listened to a tape of some 1927 wax cylinder disk recordings of his uncle and mentor, Will West Long.

**MK:** How old were you when you first saw the Bear Dance?

**WC:** I was pretty young I guess, around eight or nine years old. This Bear Dance was done at home whenever they wanted to dance. Sometimes they did it in my home, sometimes in a neighbor's home.

I guess my forefathers got the idea of making this dance hunting bear. They used to name the songs and dances to honor the animals because they were important to them for food, for their hides. They used everything. They used the teeth for necklaces — so they are sort of honoring the animals by making a dance for them.

Quail Dance is about the same as Bear Dance. Sometimes you can watch a bunch of quails — they'll be in a line traveling through the weeds. If they run into an obstacle they start backing out before they go the other way. Maybe that's the way the Indians got the idea of make a dance. Also, quails are a pretty meaty bird. You kill one, [it would be] enough for one person. So they honored birds, too, 'cause they were a source of food.

The Green Corn Dance is a man's dance — it's done around August when roasting ears come in . . . All the vegetables come in, and they have lots to eat then, all fresh. There's a field where we used to play games — stick ball games, shoot bow and arrow—and that's where the women folks took the food. About middle afternoon, I guess, folks started gathering in, bringing in food. You've heard of dinner on the ground? Well, that's the way they done. They'd bring roasting ears, green beans, cabbage, about everything [that] would be in by August. After they spread all the food, the dancers, they used shotguns, any gauge I guess, 12, 16, 20, whatever they had. There was one man, he was pretty old — his name was Campbell Tole. He didn't have a shotgun, he just had a musket. He had to load it himself. Well, he joined in with that musket and he just got to shoot one or two times during the dance, for he'd have to stop and reload it. Anyway, he enjoyed the dancing. It's just to celebrate. Like the Fourth of July they celebrate here in Cherokee with firecrackers.

The reason these dances are done so often, that's the only entertainment we had. And there was no other sport except stickball, and we just like to dance, I guess, for entertainment.

**MK:** Who were the great dancers in your community?

**WC:** Well, on the Six Nations Dance (the Mixed Dance they called it) Hayes Lossiah [now 85] he was a good leader. And Will Pheasant [deceased]. Those were the top at leading the dances. You might call them social dances. We were doing them all night long, sometimes till daylight.

**MK:** You told me you learned the songs from Will West Long. What do you remember about him?

**WC:** He was a pretty good guy. I used to spend the night with him a lot of times 'cause he had a son just about my age — Allen Long. We played together a lot and sometimes I'd go to his home to spend the night. I was pretty close to Will West 'cause he lived almost within hearing distance from where I lived, just around the hill.

**MK:** Where do you suppose all these old songs came from?

**WC:** Will West learned his singing from his daddy. I guess it was passed down from generation to generation. The Horse Dance is the only one I know that's not too old. The rest of them, no telling how long ago they started. . . .

I know part of where these songs came from. Like the boy and [his] sister, they lived with their grandma — their parents





courtesy Museum of the Cherokee Indian

Will West Long beats out time to the Eagle Dance with the local men of Big Cove in the late 1920s. The Eagle Dance was thought to bring cold spells and was practiced only occasionally after Will West's death in 1947. Some of the men are using eagle feather wands while others keep time with rattles.

must have died. Now this boy, he was the luckiest one . . . [and] his neighbors, they got jealous of him, he was so lucky, and they decided to kill him. They tried different ways of killing him, but they couldn't do it. There was a deep hole in the river, and there was a lot of fish in there — big fish. They wanted to catch the fish, so they cut a lot grapevine, just rolled it up long so the fish couldn't go through — they used it as a net to catch fish. (They really didn't mean to catch fish, they meant to kill the boy.) Somehow they got the boy to get in the middle of [the grapevine] and they [killed him]. And they didn't like his sister either, so they killed the sister. And they cut them up in small pieces. They had a big fire built, so they threw the girl in the fire, you know, to smoke. As [the smoke] was going up, the girl sung this song. Whoever was listening, whoever heard this song, that's how they learned it, while this girl was going up to heaven. She sung these songs as she went up, and whoever heard, learned them. That's the way the story goes. And this is what I sing, what Will West sung, and all . . .

**MK:** Can you tell me more about Will West Long, what it was about him that attracted you?

**WC:** I like to watch him dance, for he was the only one who knew all these different dances. He was the only one I could go to to learn them.

**MK:** Did you learn these dances by just doing them, or did he sit down with you and go over them?

**WC:** ;No, I just joined in. Sometimes I'd dance with them at the tail end [of the line] 'cause I was a little boy. He let the

kids dance at the tail end so they could learn. Will West Long never did get us kids to do the dances till we were grown. He used to start about a month and a half before fair time practicing the dances. Every Saturday, Sunday evening, he'd build a big fire and dance around the fire. It was nice like that. Some nights it lasted [until] about almost midnight.

**MK:** Did women ever sing the songs?

**WC:** On Ball Dance they did [and] did the dancing at the same time. They claim the women [would pretend to] trample on the opponents while they were dancing—in their imagination, you know, they were trampling on their opponents.

**MK:** You said that before a ball game the different communities would sit up around the fire at night?

**WC:** Yeah, communities like Big Cove were going to play, let's say Birdtown, Soco, or some other community. First they set a time when they were going to play ball, and [then] Big Cove would get the conjure man and they would do the dance. The conjure man would conjure for the ball players. I know the song they sung while the conjure man was working — the Ball Dance Song. . . .

One of the ball players would be a little ways and yell out "Wooo woo!" And the conjure man would be listening to how far the echo went. Well, if it didn't go too far, he'd tell them when to dance again, till he got an echo to cover the whole hollow or cove — that's the way they done.

**MK:** Who would they get for the conjure man, someone from the community?

**WC:** Sometimes Will West Long done that. Sometimes they used to get — I

don't know what his English name was — this Washington. He was a good one. Every time he'd conjure for the ball team, they'd usually win. And Steve Bird, they used to get him. He was a good one. He was the biggest man I ever seen, seven foot something — his wrist was as big as my leg. They used to get him to come with the ball team. . . . They had to walk from Big Cove. This conjure man would stop them about four times I guess — take them to the branch, conjure a little bit, make them wash their face, put a little water on their forehead — about four times before they got [to Cherokee]. They were ready to play ball then.

**MK:** Where did your group, the Raven Rock Dancers, get their name?

**WC:** When you go around the curve [just before my driveway] you can see a big rock sticking up, out on the mountain. Well, they called it Raven's Roost. That's where the ravens raised little ones — the Indian name is not Big Cove, it's "Where Raven's Be." That's how come I named this dance team Raven Rock Dancers, to honor that rock.

**MK:** Your grandchildren seem real anxious to learn these songs. Why do you think that is?

**WC:** I don't know, it's the dances, I guess. . . I learned it was so easy to sing the songs from Will West. 'Cause we both talk Indian. Like a person that can't talk Indian really can't sing exactly like me and Will West or any full-blood Indian. They kind of make different sounds, even if they learn to talk Indian.

**MK:** When I visited you last time you sang me a song from the Trail of Tears. Do you feel like telling me about that one?

**WC:** They used to say that when they was drove off from here that's what they sung all the way on the march. That's what the Indians sung when they were drove off to Oklahoma. It's "Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah," the English name. In other words, ask God to take care of them, guide them.

**MK:** Yesterday we were listening to a tape of Will West Long singing. There was a song he sang in the morning to protect himself.

**WC:** That's the Medicine Song to protect from witchcraft. The first time the sunshine touches the tips of the trees, that's when you're supposed to sing it — and go to the branch, wash your face, put a little on your forehead, on your chest.

**MK:** And if you sang that, what would it do?

**WC:** Well, it protects you all day long. [If] you think somebody, something was bothering you — conjurers and evil





courtesy Walker and Evelyn Calhoun

Will West Long leads the Big Cove Dancers in performance at the Cherokee Fall Festival some time in the late 1920s. Lloyd Sequoyah at the center of the group assumed leadership of the dance after Will West's death in 1947. Walker's mother, Sally Ann Calhoun is front, far right.

spirits — then you do that again. It protects you all day until you think you need to sing it again. I learned it from my mama. She was a firm believer of these things, too.

I learned some doctoring from her — when a person gets a cut . . . you just use water. Put it in your mouth and sprinkle it. You had to say a few conjure words and that stopped the bleeding and let it heal better, faster. I've never done that, though — I forget. When somebody gets cut, I usually run to a band-aid now. Back then there was no band-aids, so that's why they doctored.

**MK:** Were the dances held continuously from the time you were a little kid until you were a grown man?

**WC:** It kind of slowed down when Will West died. Lloyd Sequoyah, he tried to carry on, but he didn't know all of it. Beaver Dance, Horse Dance, and Quail Dance are most of what they done. . . . I brought back this Corn Dance and all. My brother, Lawrence, he done some, but they couldn't get him to sing the Eagle Dance Song. . . . Lawrence really believed, firm believer in what our forefathers taught about the Eagle Dance. They say it brought cold weather if you did it in the summer time in the growing season. So he wouldn't hardly sing that song or do the Eagle Dance.

**MK:** Do you believe that too?

**WC:** Well, I believe. In fact — the first time we done that down here — we had a cold spell. Mike Crow, the MC at the festival, he told me I brought that cold spell here — for doing the Eagle Dance.

The Eagle Dance is a sacred dance. The

eagle is a sacred bird to the Indians. They really honor that bird. They also use it for its feathers, and use it for ceremonial purposes because of its beauty. . . . I know a little bit of story about the eagle. My daddy used to tell this and I don't know if it's true or not. Anyway, I'm going to tell it.

He said, when you're out hunting in the woods on the mountain, if you see Eagle flying around (there used to be a lot of eagles away back then) you just set down on a log or something, wherever you was at, and sing this song, "Eagle Song" — the first part. He said the eagle will circle around where you was at, or right straight above where you was sitting. And it would stop — you know how a hawk stops in the wind there? They work their wings some way, like they're just standing still. They'll do that till you quit singing, then they'll go away. That's the way my daddy used to tell it. ■

*Michael Kline is a public folklorist at the Mountain Heritage Center, Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C. He is currently working with Walker Calhoun on production of a cassette tape of ceremonial songs mentioned in this article. The tape may be available through the Mountain Heritage Center by fall 1990. Kline's first book, Hey, You Want to Talk About It, in press at the University of Illinois, is based on 100 hours of recorded interviews with survivors of a West Virginia flood, and looks at community stories as healing.*

**NOTE:** For additional details about Big Cove dances, including diagrams, photographs, and symbols used to represent Cherokee sounds, and a brief biographical sketch of Will West Long, see *Cherokee Dance and Drama* by Frank G. Speck and Lenord Broom, University of Oklahoma Press, 1983; and "The Cherokee—Hungry for the Dance" by Jane Harris Woodside in *Now and Then*, Center for Appalachian Studies, vol. 6 no. 3, fall 1989.

We mistakenly printed in the winter '89-'90 OTH that **Historical and Biograph Records** are out of business and out of print. Arnold Caplin, president of Biograph Records, Inc., writes us that "Biograph & Historical Records has been in business for the past 25 years and is still going strong. In addition to LPs and cassettes we have been producing compact discs dealing with traditional jazz, blues, and classical music. . . ." The OTH apologizes for the error.

## DEWITT "SNUFFY" JENKINS 1908-1990

Old-time music lost one of its finest musicians with the death of Snuffy Jenkins on April 29. Born on Oct. 27, in Rutherford County, N.C., Snuffy was innovator of the 3-finger style of banjo playing, and a major influence on the playing of Don Reno and Earl Scruggs. He had a career that spanned six decades, starting in the early 1936 with his brother and friends, and later with The Hired Hands (Jenkins, Homer "Pappy" Sherrill, and Tommy Faile). Known for their comedy as well as their music, Snuffy and Pappy remained a duo, actively performing until just before Snuffy's death. Our condolences go out to Snuffy's family, and also to Pappy.

There will be an article on these two great musicians in a future issue of the OTH.