



# The spirit of Cherokee

By Katy Koontz

In Western North Carolina, just south of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, sits the town of Cherokee. Visitors will find a first-class interactive museum on Cherokee history and culture, a quality local arts and crafts cooperative, one of the longest-running outdoor dramas in the country, and a recreated 18<sup>th</sup>-century Cherokee village—not to mention a glitzy Harrah’s casino.

This is the headquarters for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the descendants of the 800 or so Cherokee who managed to stay behind when most of their people were forced to walk 1,200 miles to Oklahoma in the 1830s, during the Trail of Tears. Of the 15,000 Cherokees who made the trek, a quarter perished enroute.

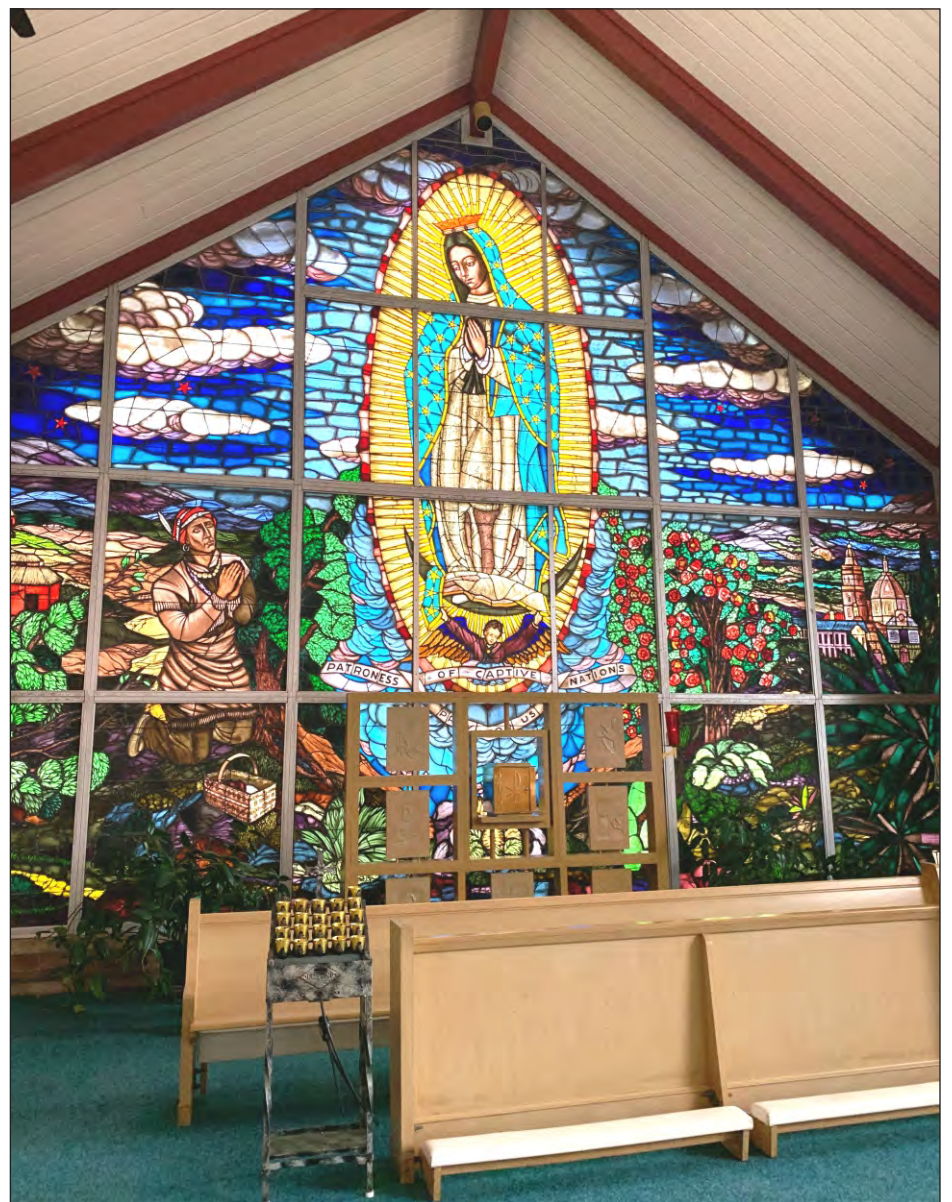
Since I live in East Tennessee, I have made several trips to Cherokee over the years, and I have hit all the tourism highlights many times over. But recently, I had an entirely different experience there, when I participated in the annual five-day Cherokee Retreat held by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia. The retreat gives participants a detailed look at the history, culture and

spirituality of the Cherokee, with presentations by a host of elders and other experts from the community. The goal is to foster an appreciation for the depth and beauty of Cherokee spirituality—essentially an expression of their relationship with the Creator and with the natural world—along with an understanding of the inter-generational trauma that has occurred over the past several hundred years and that still affects Cherokees today.


Yet, we didn’t set foot on the Cherokee Reservation all week. That is because there is no Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina. The 57,000 acres the Cherokee live on here today is officially called the Qualla Boundary. A fraction of the land the Cherokee originally occupied, this acreage was bought back by the tribe after the bulk of their vast territory was taken in the 1800s.

One of the fascinating people we met was Pastor Jack Russell of Living Waters Lutheran Church. About 85 percent of his congregation, like Russell himself, are tribal members. Living Waters’ services include such

See KOONTZ on next page



The stained-glass window at Our Lady of Guadalupe Roman Catholic Church in Cherokee, NC, depicts Sequoyah kneeling in front of Our Lady. Photo credit: Katy Koontz



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Continued from previous page KOONTZ



This bear sculpture in downtown Cherokee, NC, is painted with the 86 symbols that make up the Cherokee syllabary, invented by a Cherokee named Sequoyah in the late 1820s. Photo credit: Katy Koontz



The Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee, NC. The museum uses interactive exhibits to cover 13,000 years of Cherokee history. The museum's logo is a representation of the water spider, prominently featured in Cherokee mythology.

elements as smudging with sage, drumming and honoring the four directions (which together signify all of creation) as a preparation for worship, while the liturgy itself remains strictly traditional Lutheran. Incorporating such Native elements shows honor and respect for all, Russell explained, underscoring our common humanity.

The Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadeloupe, is well worth exploring,

if you are there on a Sunday. Its seven-sided building is patterned after the shape of the traditional Cherokee council house. Seven mosaics symbolizing the seven Cherokee matrilineal clans are embedded in the floor, circling a central altar. In addition, a large stained-glass window features a Cherokee village in the background and a Cherokee man named Sequoyah kneeling in front of the

church's namesake. Sequoyah is known for inventing a written language for his tribe, based on 86 symbols—one for each syllable in their spoken language.

Our retreat also included a visit to a Cherokee language immersion school and the chance to explore Kituwah, a sacred site where the Cherokees first settled, among many other experiences. While retreat activities change from year to year,

the program always offers time for regular theological reflection, opportunities to affirm the sacredness of creation, and the chance to connect with the Cherokee people.

For more information on Cherokee, visit the website at [visitchokeenc.com](http://visitchokeenc.com). For information about the Cherokee Retreat sponsored by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, visit [ccappal.org/chokeee-retreat](http://ccappal.org/chokeee-retreat).


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**SUDOKU PUZZLE on page 13**


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8	3	7	9	4	6	5	2	1
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**DOWN & ACROSS PUZZLE on page 15**

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