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### Chitto Harjo (Wilson Jones, Crazy Snake) 1846-1912 Creek leader

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### **Harjo, Chitto (Wilson Jones, Crazy Snake) (1846—1912) *Creek leader***

Chitto Harjo, a CREEK known variously as Wilson Jones or Crazy Snake (Chitto in Creek means snake; Harjo translates as passionately brave) was born in Indian Territory (now part of Oklahoma) and became leader of the Crazy Snakes, or Snakes, a traditionalist faction of the Creek. Harjo rose to prominence in the late 19th century in reaction to federal incursions on reservation lands, attacks on Indian lifestyles, and governance structures. As leader of the Snakes, he fought against Allotment (individual distribution) of communal tribal lands, the assimilation of the Creek Nation into Anglo-American society, and the loss of Creek SOVEREIGNTY.

The GENERAL ALLOTMENT ACT of 1887 brought an end to the traditional Indian approach to communal use of land and replaced it with allotments to individual Indians. Creeks resisted the U.S. government's allotment policy. Its implementation was also complicated by the fact that "full bloods" resented that MESTIZOS, or blacks and whites who intermarried with Creek, were entitled to land allotments equal to their own as well as access to tribal funds. Black slaves in the Creek community who become freedmen following the Civil War were also entitled to tribal property. Many Creek, in an act tantamount to civil disobedience, chose not to register for allotments.

Another blow to Creek sovereignty came in 1898 when the federal CURTIS ACT terminated all Native governments without the consent of the tribes, abolishing their tribal courts and placing Indians under the jurisdiction of the United States. By then, realizing that resistance to federal demands was futile, the Creek's remaining National Council reluctantly voted in 1899 to cooperate with the Dawes Commission's recommendations for allotment. The Council also recognized that statehood for Oklahoma, which had been under discussion since 1893 was inevitable.

In 1900, a faction led by Chitto Harjo established its own rival underground government at the Sacred village of Hickory Ground, directly challenging the tribe's leadership. Called Snakes, in honor of their leader, they claimed that the National Council was not speaking for the majority of Creek. They further maintained that Allotment was a violation of the federal government's 1832 Treaty of Washington, in which traditional tribal use of the land in common had been guaranteed.

Harjo and the Snakes established their own laws and punished any Creek who acceded to Allotment and leased lands to whites. In 1901, the faction led an unsuccessful uprising that was sensationalized in the newspapers. The Snakes enlisted the help of other dissident Indian tribes, and it was feared that this alliance could degenerate into an explosive situation. Chief Pleasant Porter (who had presided over the allotment of Creek lands) asked for help from the

federal government, which sent the military to carry out the peaceful arrest of Chitto Harjo and his followers. Convicted but given suspended sentences, the Snakes were ordered to cease their activities. This did not happen, and Harjo was imprisoned in 1902.

Despite continued unrest, Harjo and the Snakes started to change their tactics and attempted to work within the political system. They sought Creek tribal offices, made petitions, and corresponded with federal officials about their grievances. Harjo met with President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, to little avail, but the Senate called for an investigation into the conditions of the Five Civilized Tribes.

In 1906, Harjo gave moving testimony, in Creek, before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. He asked for a return to the conditions existing under the 1832 treaty, where land was held in common by the Indians and they could roam the forests "as nomads." His speech was an indictment of civilization, but clearly things had progressed too far to go back. In preparation for the combining of the Indian Territory and the Oklahoma Territory, the Creek tribal government was abolished in 1906. The following year, the state of Oklahoma was created.

The Smoked Meat Rebellion of 1909 ultimately led to Harjo's downfall. That year, the Snakes were accused of sheltering thieves who had escaped a black race riot in nearby Henryetta. On March 25, when a posse came to Hickory Grove to arrest the accused men, violence broke out and the imposition of federal law on Indian lands was tested. Harjo was blamed for the deaths of some 15 men involved in the incident. Though he was not even in the area at the time, he was forced into hiding, spending his final days as a fugitive.

Details of Harjo's life following this incident are murky, and it is thought that he died in 1911 of wounds following another skirmish with U.S. troops. His death left a leadership void that effectively ended the dissident Snakes movement. By 1934, the U.S. Indian Reorganization Act (see WHEELER-HOWARD ACT) reversed the very policy of Allotment that Chitto Harjo had consistently opposed, and it restored tribal self-government for Indians.

Janet Butler Munch

**Further reading:** Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1940); Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Kenneth Waldo McIntosh, *Chitto Harjo, the Gray Snakes, and the Birth of Indian Activism in the Twentieth Century* (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1993).

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