

Cherokee, NC

In 1900, James Mooney concludes the historical sketch of the Cherokee with which he opens his Bureau of Ethnology report, Myths of the Cherokee, with this decisive comment: "The older people still cling to their ancient rites and sacred traditions, but the dance and the ballplay wither and the Indian day is nearly spent" (181). A little over one hundred years later, the image dominating the town of Cherokee on the old Qualla Boundary is a high-rise luxury hotel, the newest addition to Harrah's Casino complex. A mile or so back on the road into the reservation from Soco Gap, the Santa Land amusement park with its main attraction, the Rudycoaster (complete with Rudolph's head attached to the front car) daily attracts hundreds of visitors as it has every summer since 1965. The streets of Cherokee proper are lined with shops hawking everything from rubber tomahawks and chainsaw carvings of bear and deer to "genuine" baskets and beaded necklaces. SUVs lined up to get into the Cherokee Fun Park, with its "old timey" wooden roller coaster, bumper boats, and go-cart track, create endless traffic jams in July and August. Only by waiting in yet another long line can visitors reach the relative quiet of a campsite in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the most heavily visited in the nation. To the casual observer, the Cherokee that Mooney described have indeed vanished into a maelstrom of commercialism and tourist traffic.