Yonaguska (or Drowning Bear) [1]

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by Theda Perdue

1760?–April 1839

Yonaguska (or Drowning Bear), was head chief of the Cherokee [2] middle towns in the crucial years from 1800 until his death. The exact date and place of his birth are unknown, but Charles Lanman [3], who visited the eastern Cherokee a decade after the old chief's death, reported that Yonaguska was "born in this mountain land . . . and died in the year 1838, in the seventy-fifth year of his age." Probably one of the last practitioners of polygamy among the Cherokee, Yonaguska was survived by two wives and many children.

As head chief he consistently urged peace with the United States and played a prominent role in the meeting between Cherokee chiefs and Tecumseh [4] in 1811. This conference resulted in the Cherokee's refusal to join the Shawnee [5] leader in his alliance with the British for an offensive against the United States.

In accordance with a provision of the treaty that delegates of the Cherokee Nation [2] signed with the federal government in 1819, Yonaguska and the heads of at least fifty other families who lived along the Oconaluftee [6], Tuckasegee [7], and Little Tennessee [8] rivers between the Balsam [9] and Cowee [10] mountains withdrew from the nation, received a reservation of 640 acres each, and became citizens of the state of North Carolina and the United States. Yonaguska's reservation was located on Governors Island [11] at the confluence of the Oconaluftee and Tuckasegee rivers, and his followers obtained reservations along the Oconaluftee River and near Quallatown. In 1820 the chief sold his reservation for $1,300 and moved to Quallatown.

The extension of state laws over the Cherokee Nation [2] in the late 1820s freed traders from the restrictions previously imposed on the sale of liquor and allowed unscrupulous speculators, whose appetite for land had been whetted by the discovery of gold in northern Georgia, to employ alcohol in frequently successful attempts to negotiate illegal sales of Cherokee property. Yonaguska realized that intemperance would destroy both himself and his tribesmen. According to William Holland Thomas [12], the white trader whom Yonaguska's clan adopted, the chief assembled the Oconaluftee Cherokee [13] in 1830 and informed them that "he had been considering and devising ways to promote their happiness in the future." Citing the Catawba Indians [14] who had almost been exterminated "as evidence of the injurious effects of intemperance," Yonaguska encouraged his people to refrain from the immoderate consumption of alcohol and then instructed his clerk to write down a pledge by which the Qualla Indians agreed to "abandon the use of spiritous liquors." The chief signed first, and all the residents of the town reportedly followed. In 1838 Thomas credited Yonaguska with the Oconaluftee Cherokee's "present state of improvement" because of his devotion to the cause of temperance.

When the Cherokee Council convened at New Echota [15] in 1835 at the behest of the U.S. agent, the Reverend John F. Schermerhorn, to sign a treaty by which the Cherokee ceded all lands in the eastern United States and agreed to remove west of the Mississippi River [16], Yonaguska did not attend. He vehemently opposed removal, but after a minority of Cherokee led by John Ridge [17], Major Ridge [18], and Elias Boudinot [19] accepted the government's proposal, Yonaguska dispatched Thomas to Washington. D.C. [20], to ensure that the Oconaluftee Cherokee received their share of the benefits of the treaty. Thomas hesitated to take up the matter with the government for fear of delaying ratification by the Senate [21] and thereby depriving the Cherokee who were desperately in need of financial aid of immediate assistance, but he did sign an agreement with the Ridge party in which the senators recognized the claim of the Oconaluftee Cherokee.

In 1837 Yonaguska and fifty-nine other Oconaluftee Cherokee submitted a memorial in which they stated to the commissioners who had been appointed to carry out the Treaty of New Echota [22] that they were opposed to removal. The commissioners acknowledged the provision in the 1819 treaty by which the Oconaluftee Cherokee had withdrawn from the Cherokee Nation and become citizens of North Carolina, granted them their memorial, and exempted them from forced removal. According to Thomas, the primary motivation for Yonaguska's resistance to removal stemmed from the chief's belief that North Carolina, the state that had recognized the Cherokee's land titles, was "better and more friendly disposed to the Red Man than any other. That should they remove west, they would there too be, in a short time, surrounded by the settlements of the whites, and probably be included in a State disposed to oppress them." Yonaguska demonstrated his loyalty to North Carolina and the federal government by ordering his warriors to assist U.S. troops in capturing those Cherokee who had hidden in the mountains. For rendering this aid he received a commendation from Colonel William L. Foster, commanding officer of the Fourth U.S. Infantry.

Yonaguska's leadership ability, his steadfast dedication to temperance, and his willingness to cooperate with the U.S. government enabled the Oconaluftee Cherokee to secure the enforcement of the treaty of 1819 and the recognition of their rights as North Carolina citizens. Thus the followers of Yonaguska managed to avoid removal.

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