

Junaluska, the Cherokee who saved Andrew Jackson's life and made him a national hero, lived to regret it. Born in the North Carolina mountains around 1776, he made his name and his fame among his own people in the War of 1812 when the mighty tribe of Creek Indians allied themselves with the British against the United States. At the start of the Creek War, Junaluska recruited some 800 Cherokee warriors to go to the aid of Andrew Jackson in northern Alabama. Joined by reinforcements from Tennessee, including more Cherokee, the Cherokee spent the early months of 1814 performing duties in the rear, while Jackson and his Tennessee militia moved like a scythe through the Creek towns. However, that March word came that the Creek Indians were massed behind fortifications at Horseshoe Bend. Jackson, with an army of 2,000 men, including 500 Cherokee led by Junaluska, set out for the Bend, 70 miles away. There, the Tallapoosa River made a bend that enclosed 100 acres in a narrow peninsula opening to the north. On the lower side was an island in the river. Across the neck of the peninsula the Creek had built a strong breastwork of logs and hidden dozens of canoes for use if retreat became necessary.

Storming The Fort:

The fort was defended by 1,000 warriors. There also were 300 women and children. As cannon fire bombarded the fort, the Cherokee crossed the river three miles below and surrounded the bend to block the Creek escape route. They took position where the Creek fort was separated from them by water. The battle raged throughout the morning. There were dead and wounded on both sides. Among the frontiersmen fighting for Jackson that day were Sam Houston & Davy Crockett.

Saving Jackson's Life And His Reputation:

A few prisoners were brought in, and while officers were attempting to question them in the presence of Jackson, one broke loose, snatched up a knife, and lunged for the general. Junaluska, who had seen the move, responded quickly, sticking out a foot and tripping the Creek warrior, saving Jackson's life. As the battle wore on, Junaluska conceived a brilliant plan. Without notifying Jackson, he gathered a dozen Cherokees, sneaked to the river's edge behind the fort, plunged into the water, and swam over to where the Creek canoes were moored. Junaluska and his braves freed the canoes and maneuvered them to the opposite bank where other Cherokee warriors piled into them and, under cover of a steady fire from their own companions, returned to the opposite bank, thus breaching Creek defenses. When more than half the Creeks lay dead, the rest turned and plunged into the river, only to find the banks on the opposite side lined with blazing guns and escape cut off in every direction. Of the 1,300 Creeks inside the stockade, including women and children, not more than 20 escaped. Of 300 prisoners, only three were men. Two weeks after the decisive battle, Billy Weatherford, the greatest of the Creek chiefs, surrendered to Jackson, turning the general into a national hero.

Another Promise Broken:

When the battle of Horseshoe Bend was over, Jackson is reported to have told Junaluska: "As long as the sun shines and the grass grows, there shall be friendship between us, and the feet of the Cherokee shall be toward the east." In a few short years Junaluska would have occasion to recall those words with bitterness. When the great removal of the Cherokee began, Junaluska said: "If I had known that Jackson would drive us from our homes, I would have killed him that day at the Horseshoe."

The Great Chief Returns:

Junaluska was among the Cherokee removed to the West. But he returned to the mountains of his birth in 1842, walking all the way from what is now Oklahoma. And when he returned, the state of North Carolina stepped in and recognized the debt that America owed him. By a special act of the state legislature in 1847, North Carolina conferred upon him the right of citizenship and granted him a tract of land at what is now Robbinsville, in Graham County. Junaluska died in 1858 and was buried on a hill above the town where, in 1910, the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a monument to his memory.

A Tribute To Junaluska: The script on the bronze plaque, bolted to a great hunk of native stone, says in part: "Here lie the bodies of the Cherokee Chief, Junaluska, and Nicie, his wife. Together with his warriors he saved the life of General Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, and for his bravery and faithfulness North Carolina made him a citizen and gave him land in Graham County." An organization known as "Junaluska's Friends" was recently organized, and restored the Junaluska grave site. Their work will be primarily devoted to keeping alive the memory of this Chief.