

The Creation of Cherokee Basket Maker at Old Jail Museum

By Darry Wood

My first experience with the Old Jail Museum was in 1980, when Gertrude Price invited me to exhibit my art and craft work. In those days Michael Hockaday and I were working closely together and he also contributed to the exhibit. The display featured our handmade furniture, wood carvings, stained glass panels and an assortment of American Indian–inspired objects produced over the years. This diverse collection filled the central room of the Old Jail that in recent years has been entirely devoted to Cherokee culture. We set up a Cheyenne-style tipi on the front lawn of the Old Jail for the last 2 weeks of the show, which continued for over a month. I’ve had a soft spot in my heart for that place ever since.

From an early age I had a fascination with museums. I love what they teach us about the nature of our Earth and especially, about our human past and present. I’ve spent hundreds of hours roaming museums devoted to many different kinds knowledge but more than any other subject, I pursued the history and material culture of the Native American people.

My primary interest in this area has been to study the traditional clothing of various tribes. I was disappointed to learn how very few garments have survived that can be attributed to the Cherokee. And I became aware that an accurate, life-size figure representing a Cherokee was nowhere be found. Thus, sometime in the early 1980s, it became my ambition to try to remedy this situation.

Almost no items of clothing from any tribal group have survived from the era before European contact. Today what we consider “traditional Indian clothing” will usually feature materials acquired from Euro-American traders, such as glass beads, silver jewelry, silk ribbons and textiles of many kinds. Native people used this rich array of trade goods together with their long-established aesthetics of personal adornment to create new styles of colorful, well-decorated garments.

Among the Cherokee and other Southeastern tribes the development of this beautiful clothing peaked during the early 19th century. But the Indian Removal policy of the United States government in the 1830s devastated the people, both those who arrived at the new lands in the West and the small percentage who were able to remain in their homeland. Much of their traditional culture was forever ruined and the great majority quickly converted to wearing the same clothing as the dominant culture.

An important source of information as to what Cherokees were wearing in the 18th and 19th centuries comes from a limited number of portraits that were drawn before the advent of photography. Other direct evidence comes from a small sample of moccasins, beaded shoulder bags, coats and leggings that randomly exist in museum collections in Washington DC, New York, Toronto, Los Angeles, Oklahoma, Florida and a few private collections. None of these miscellaneous articles of early Cherokee clothing remain in North Carolina with the possible exception of an 1830- era beaded belt that is now on display in the Old Jail Museum. Although these few surviving items from more or less 200 years ago were generally constructed by women, they are, with rare exception, things that were worn by men. Also regrettable is the fact that none of the historic images illustrating traditional Cherokee dress includes a woman.

I did find sufficient evidence to draw plans for a museum figure representing an early 19th century man. My concept was to make the clothing using materials and patterns as close to the originals as I could get, and then to sculpt a 6-foot tall male mannequin from local wood. In one hand he would extend a typical tobacco pipe with a long stem & soapstone bowl, and in the other he would hold a flintlock long-rifle of the period.

To produce some of the clothing accessories that such a warrior would likely wear, I employed the services of two talented women from the Eastern Band of Cherokee

Indians: Mary Shell, recognized as the leading finger-weaver of the tribe, made the complex yarn garters and sash, and Berdina Crowe, who specialized in making traditional Cherokee dolls, did some of the beadwork and sewing detail on the leggings. In 1989 the completed figure was bought by the Museum of the Cherokee Indian where he stood on display for many years. More recently, the figure has been on loan to other venues & museums in the area.

That experience increased my desire to create a comparable female figure. In Cherokee society, women had great power and autonomy. They were the leaders of a matriarchal social system and were renowned for their artistry. Of their many ancient arts, perhaps the most exquisite was rivercane basketry, which is still practiced today. By the time I was ready to construct a female museum figure, I had spent many days watching older-generation Cherokee women split and dye the rivercane and weave it into intricately-designed baskets, the like of which have been highly esteemed since colonial times by non-Indian observers. I knew that if I was going to make a life-size, three dimensional likeness of a Cherokee woman, she would have to be doing something, and the highest thing I could imagine was that she would be weaving a large rivercane basket.

The grounds downhill from the Old Jail Museum have become the site of a highly acclaimed Cherokee Homestead Exhibit. Under the leadership of Rob Tiger, with sponsorship from the Clay County Historical & Arts Council, the CCCRA, and with funding from various grants, the public can visit a re-creation of Cherokee dwellings from the 1700s and before. My involvement with the Cherokee Homestead came rather late, but I've enjoyed contributing to the project in various ways. Rob made me aware that some of the funding for this endeavor had come through matching grants from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, an agency of the Eastern Band. With the worthy help of John Bayne, we applied for and received a substantial grant from CPF, which enabled the accomplishment of a vision I had been carrying around in my head for a long time.

I mentioned the rarity of documented Cherokee women's clothing. As best I can discover, the entirety consists of one pair of moccasins from the late 1830s. To construct a complete outfit would require some careful comparisons to other tribes of the region.

The area we now think of as the southeastern United States was home to many groups of indigenous people who spoke a variety of languages and were often in conflict with each other. But because they all shared a similar climate and approximately the same natural resources, these independent groups practiced like methods of subsistence and shared common patterns of culture. The two dominant groups in the SE became known as the Creeks, who call themselves *Muskogee*, and to their north, the Cherokees, who pronounce their name *Tsaligi*. There were also Yuchis and Catawbas, Choctaws and Chickasaws, Seminoles and others, all of whom hunted mostly the same species of game, grew the same varieties of crops, followed similar religious practices and, after the European invasion, had dealings with the same Anglo traders.

From the early 1800s there are a number of portraits of Creek men and quite a few articles of their clothing that indicate they dressed very much like Cherokee men; judging from this record, the two are practically indistinguishable. There are also portraits of Creek, Choctaw and other Eastern Native women during this period that show a strong similarity to each other in their attire. So it seems fair to conclude that the costume of Cherokee women would follow much the same style. This is how I arrived at an understanding of how to recreate a proper early 19th century dress for the representative Cherokee person I came to call "Lura Weaver."

For years I had been accumulating a selection of fabrics and beads that resembled typical trade goods of the early 1800s. After much research, I understood the authentic patterns for the skirt, blouse and moccasins. With the help of a silversmith who made reproductions of historic jewelry and a Cherokee beadworker-friend, I

was confident that I could come up with a credible outfit. To sculpt a full-size female mannequin from wood would no doubt be a serious challenge, but I felt prepared to take it on. The one element of this basket maker exhibit that I did not possibly have the skill to produce was the partially-finished basket.

Rivercane (*arundinaria gigantea*) was the single-most important wild plant in the ancient culture of the Southeastern Indians. For thousands of years they put this plant to dozens of everyday uses. It can be thought of as the true native American bamboo, and though it was once abundant throughout the region, in modern times genuine “cane” has become quite scarce (the bamboo species that most of us are familiar with are all Asian invaders).

Another thing that has become increasingly rare is a Cherokee (or anybody else) who can produce a fine rivercane basket. This is especially true of baskets made with the difficult technique for which Cherokee women have long been famous known as “double-weaving.” This amounts to a seamless single container that is sometimes woven from hundreds of strips of rivercane to a standard that is tight enough to hardly leak water.

After spending more time harvesting, splitting, scraping and dying the material than will actually be required to weave the basket, the maker starts at the inside bottom, continues up the sides and makes a tight, diagonal fold across each strip at the very top, to form the rim. Then she continues on down the outside, so that only the hard, shiny outer surface of the cane will be seen on both sides of the work. Right up until the final moments of completion there are long, thin streamers of cane protruding from the bottom of the basket; these are then trimmed and tucked so that there is no way to tell where the weaving begins or ends.

Two sisters for whom *Tsaligi* is their first language are the living masters of this art. Lucile and Ramona Lossiah agreed to collaborate and make for us a double-woven basket larger than any that had been produced for decades. Part of our deal was that

when they were almost finished with this proposed masterpiece, I would photograph one of them in the process of weaving. This was so that I could rely on images of her hand and body positions to model my carving. After that, there would be no further work on the basket because the central idea was that of a person actively making a basket, not just holding a completed example.

It took the Lossiah sisters several months to have the piece ready according to plan. There was quite a bit of money exchanged, which worked out nicely for us all because the money was provided by our grant from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation.

In the year of 1838 throughout the territory now known as Clay County, NC, there were approximately 3,000 people gathered up and forced to immigrate west of the Mississippi River to so-called Indian Territory, a tragic journey that in their language translates “the trail where they cried.” Many of these souls had lived in a village at the lower end of Shooting Creek on a tributary that today is called Hot House Branch. The term “hot house” refers to the large community building that was at the heart of every Cherokee town, where a central fire was maintained night and day, year round.

Lura Patterson Ledford was born in a log cabin on Hot House in 1903. She was proud of her Cherokee heritage and very knowledgeable about the plants and animals of the mountains. She knew many herbal folk remedies and was sought after for her skills as a midwife. She kept honey bees, was adept at finding ginseng, enthusiastically fished for trout, hunted wild turkeys, deer, grouse and squirrels. When we moved to Clay County 45 years ago, Mrs. Ledford was our closest neighbor and became my mentor in the ways of the South Appalachian woods. She lived to the age of 97, and 10 years after she died, when I began to carve the mannequin that was about to become the Cherokee basket maker in the Old Jail Museum, it seemed natural for me to refer to this creation as Lura.

Another one of my favorite ladies whose ancestors had eluded the Trail of Tears and remained in North Carolina was Eva Littlejohn Bigwitch. She was the first person I ever observed using a knife to split rivercane into basket material. The ease and speed with which she worked was most impressive, the result of over 40 years of practice. She told me how hard it had become to find decent rivercane, so I offered to cut her some from a patch in North Georgia to which I had access. After that, my phone was subject to ring at any time day or night: over the other end there would sometimes come a voice with a thick Cherokee accent asking, “When you gonna bring me more cane?”

Over the next couple of decades, the amount of rivercane that I cut in Georgia and hauled to Eva Bigwitch’s doorstep outside of Cherokee, NC, would have amounted to somewhere near a ton. To appreciate that this is not a gross exaggeration, one must understand that only a portion of each stalk of cane can be made into splits, and the splits used to double-weave a basket must be scraped as thin as paper, so that for every pound of rivercane harvested, only a fraction of an ounce ends up in the finished product.

I sometimes took cane to other basket makers, but Ms. Eva was my best friend among them all. I got to know her family and had many good times in their company. She passed away a few years before we wrote the grant to create the basket maker exhibit for which she was my original inspiration. I decided to dedicate the project to her memory, and when the completed figure was first presented in public at the annual Hayesville Cherokee festival in the fall of 2011, two carloads of Bigwitch children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren came from Cherokee to attend the event. It was one of the great honors of my life.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite everyone to the upcoming Cherokee Heritage Festival at the Old Jail/ Homestead Exhibit on September 21, 2019. There will be many members of the Eastern Band on hand to demonstrate their traditional

songs & dances, arts & crafts, etc. And it will be an opportunity, of course, to visit the Museum and meet Lura Weaver.

This is part of a series of articles about historical gems in the Old Jail Museum and the interesting stories behind them. The museum is closed for the winter, but we hope to have made many improvements when it opens for the summer season.

The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is currently seeking to raise funds for the repair and restoration of the Old Jail Museum. To donate you may visit our website clayhistoryarts.org or mail your check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to CCHAC, P. O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 28904