



Interviewee: Mr. Choogie Kingfisher, Cherokee Nation National Treasure, Class of 2019 for Storytelling, United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, Tahlequah, Oklahoma

Interview date: September 4, 2020

Subjects: Cherokee culture, American Indian textiles, Living Archaeology Weekend

Interviewer: Ms. Rebecca Hawkins, Associate Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.; Owner, Algonquin Consultants, Miami, Oklahoma

Location: Tahlequah, Oklahoma

Notes: The interview was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, we selected an outdoor location to mitigate personal contact. There was significant landscaping noise during portions of the interview, which were abated in the final video, but not in the original media.

Q. Why do you think it's important for people to understand the textile technologies of ancient American Indian cultures from Kentucky?

A. "When we look back on history and we begin to study what they did - making sandals, making baskets, making mats to sleep on, to sit on - we want to keep that knowledge alive within our youth, within those that want to know. Because, the way that they told us a long time ago, the old ones say that one of these days, we're going to use that knowledge again. So, by keeping these methods around - by keeping them, by teaching them - then when the time comes, we're going to be able to be one step ahead of what's going on."

A. "I see a lot of things now that I haven't seen in 20 years, and it makes my heart happy, because the younger ones are starting to take note of it. They're learning quicker than what maybe someone else would. They're putting it into the context of technology now, and so by doing that, we know that it's going to be around forever. That's why we're doing this series - is because we want it to be around for generations past us. We always talk about the Seventh Generation. We're getting to that point. What happens after that, this is going to help sustain that."

Q. Why do you think it's important for the general public to understand this past?(cut from videotape)

A. "I believe it's important for the general public to view what was once there on their property. Many times when I come to Kentucky and I talk with school-aged kids, I talk with those that come to my programs. I ask them, 'Do you know who used to live here before you did?' Many of them will respond with 'Grandma' or 'Grandpa,' or someone like that. I said, 'Further back than that. You see, maybe it was my great, great, great-grandpa that lived where you live now.' I want the general public to understand that there was life in the land that they call home before they ever called it 'home.'"

A. "The general public today seems to lose a lot of respect for a lot of things. That's why we have graffiti on pictographs and everything else in caves. By educating the general public, we kind of 'whack' that away slowly. They begin to respect, they begin to understand that the things that were here before them will ultimately tell their story and where they need to be going."

Q. How did the removal of American Indians from their lands in the Eastern Woodlands change their culture, and their knowledge of ancient textile technologies?

A. "The Removal from the eastern part of the United States for the Cherokee people, and some of the smaller tribes that we took in, changed a lot of things. Not just the textiles, but it changed our way of thinking. It changed our religion. It changed life in general. And so when we came over the Trail, the one thing that was always intact was our religion. Now, many may not consider our textile-ways as part of our religion, but everything ties together."

"Before the Removal, we had already gone to metal plowshares instead of stone or bone. We had already gone to cast-iron skillets instead of clay pots. We had already gone from woven tree-fiber skirts, shoes, to the clothing of that time period. You see, even in that time, we were already doctors, lawyers. We were blacksmiths. We were farmers. We were teachers. When the Trail of Tears happened, they took all of that, and we took all of that, and brought it with us. I remember as a child sitting on the floor beside my grandmother watching her weave, asking her, 'Granny, where did you learn how to do that?' 'Oh, my granny showed me and probably her granny showed her.' So, the knowledge was still there."

"Why? Because again, we knew that we would need it somewhere in some time. The Trail of Tears may have moved us out of our homelands, and we began using different types of plant fibers because of the different terrain. We began using round reed instead of split reed in our baskets. But the baskets were still made to store our belongings, store our crops. Because, even in the 1970s, I remember many families growing huge gardens. The shoes - they still hung around. Every once in a while, you would find a pair in a house and they were more house shoes than anything else. The bags still hung around. Some of them were plant fiber. Some of

them were wool. So, everything that the public is learning about in this exhibit was still there after the Trail of Tears, just not as broad as it once was.”

“Today, I’m happy to say that many of these things have made their appearance back: from our baskets to our shoes to our bags, all the way to our musical instruments - our water drum, our flutes - even to our ceremonies. Those things are coming back. That’s why I know that the prophecies that were told by our people are coming true. Because, they say all of that will come back to us. I’m happy to see that.”

“No matter where it’s coming from, whether it’s coming from Kentucky, whether it’s coming from Ohio, whether it’s coming from Oklahoma or North Carolina - I’m glad it’s here.”

“As I sit here and remember many of the things that we’re talking about, I made mention that I was happy that things were coming to light. Much of that is due to the work of archaeologists that are combing through some of our village sites, that are combing through the trails that we left in the mountains coming here to Oklahoma, even the townships that were settled here. And what I’m finding is, just like everything else in our culture, that it is a teaching tool.”

“When you learn how to weave - whether you’re weaving a skirt with plant fiber, whether you’re weaving a basket, whether you’re weaving a bag or a mat - there is a lesson in all of it. When you begin to look at it, it teaches you patience.”

“That’s the Number One thing in almost everything that we do: is patience. Because when you ask a question, many times, an elder will not answer. They’ll watch you. And, after they watch you for a time, and they feel that you’re prepared to know, ready enough for the answer, they’ll answer you. Sometimes the answer may come within a few seconds. Sometimes years. But, you have to wait.”

“Making a basket, making a skirt - whatever it may be, even down to our pottery, our flutes, our stickball sticks - you begin to understand that it takes time for these things to happen. For our little ones, you see them running around today all over the place, and sometimes parents throw their hands up and say ‘What can I do to teach my children to give them a little bit more patience?’ First: spend time with them. Teach them something. Don’t sit them in front of a computer. Don’t sit them in front of a TV or a phone. But, sit down and teach them something - because that’s going to teach you patience, too; because we are now living in what we call a ‘microwave society.’ We want it now. We want it now. We want it now.”

“I see many wonderful creations come out of patience. It teaches you to endure, because you do have to go out and find the materials you need - whether it’s white oak splints, whether it’s buck brush or honeysuckle - you have to find it. You have to process it. You have to color it. And then the teaching begins. So, it’s a process. You begin to learn to follow instructions. Many times, we want to take shortcuts. That’s not the way to do things. You learn to appreciate your work. You learn to make mistakes and correct them and keep going. You learn that no matter

what, you have to finish. You can't start something and not finish it."

"I'm a prime example of that. I wanted to learn how to make baskets, and so I sat at the feet of the women and I watched. Never asked any questions. I was too stubborn, but I watched. And every time I would try my basket, I would get to a certain point, and I would get frustrated and I would put it back in the stream. For three years I did that, but I never quit. At the end of the summer on the third year, I completed my basket, because I was always taught: once you start it, you have to finish it. So, the lessons that are learned - and can be learned by the public in learning about our textiles and their methods of making - can teach you a lot of things. Life teaches you a lot of things, and so by being prepared, you're better equipped to face life. At least, that's the way the old ones told me."

Q. Why is it important for you to understand and preserve this knowledge?

A. "I've used the things that I've taught, that I've learned about working with textiles, and I have four children. I have two older and two younger. I have five grandchildren. I love all of them. Every chance that I get, I take them with me, and we go here or there, and there's always a story, because I want them to know where Daddy came from. I want them to understand the stories behind these places. I want them to understand that everything is important in our culture. Just like I had mentioned before, all of these things teach lessons."

"I want my children to be prepared. I may fail here or there, as most parents will. But, we try our hardest. The one thing that I try to instill in parents and grandparents is that they have a story to tell. When their child or their grandchild comes up to them and says, 'Where are we from? Who are we?' I always give the example of: I don't want them to say, 'Oh, your name is little Johnny. You were born in this hospital and this is who you are.' And they open a book, or they get on the computer and type in 'Cherokee people.' That's not personal."

"I wish everyone could experience the childhood that I grew up in, but I know it's not possible. You see, where I grew up, there were basket weavers. There were carvers. There were cooks. There were gatherers. There were all of these, which was essential for each community - even when we were in the East Country. That's the way that I grew up. It was a wonderful time in my life, and I cherish it dearly, and I try to give my children just a pinch of that. Every time I do a program, I try to bring them into my thoughts, my memories. Because I want those children, I want my audience to know that everything that I teach them - everything that all of these other teachers that are out here that are trying to do - that it's important. It teaches so many lessons, that many times we just think they're games. Many times, we just think they're arts and crafts. Many times, we just think that it's about religion or tribal politics."

"We are here for a reason. I sit here in front of you as a full-blood Keetoowah Cherokee. I'm one of a very few. I always tell the kids, I said 'I'm a dinosaur.' Because our breed is dying out. But that doesn't mean our knowledge needs to be lost. That

doesn't mean that we need to compromise just to exist. It's 2020, and here we sit talking about what used to be, what is" – [firetruck sirens].

"And here we sit in 2020 - still alive, still speaking our language, still making pottery, baskets, still singing our songs. This world that we know has tried to forget who we are."

"They have tried to erase the memory off of the land that they now live on. We can't let that happen. There are those that will pass by this exhibit and say, 'Oh, that doesn't mean anything.' It means everything. Because, one of these days, those that are out there - that are saying that - will come back to us and say, 'Teach us, because we want to live, too.' That's the wonderful thing. That as I've studied throughout my years, I found that many prophecies throughout tribes kind of relate to that same ending: is that they will come to us and we need to be prepared. How do we need to be prepared? How should we be prepared? Is by learning."

"Learning of these old ways - how to make baskets, how to make mats, how did we build our homes - because one of these days, these nice fancy homes that you see, they may be no more. We may have to go back into our mud huts. We may have to go back into all of these other tribal dwellings. It's important for us to remember."

"But, as in any society, as in any culture, there are those things that need to stay behind. We need to respect that and leave them there, because there was a time for it. The time is no more. And the elders warned us of that. They say that when you begin to bring up old things that no longer need to be done in this world, you are calling the enemy back."

"Are we prepared for that? I don't know. Again, these are my personal thoughts. And, I share them, because I want the public to understand that I may dress like them. I may talk like them. I may eat like them. But, in the end time, there is no them. It's just an 'us.' You see - we were told that Creator does not look at skin color. He looks at the spirit. We need to remember that and treat each other with respect. There are four major colors of people in this world. Each one of them was given a gift. They said that in the end time, we are going to need each other."

"Right now, we argue and fight with each other, and we can't even agree on anything. We even fight when we don't even understand each other's languages, but we fight. Those four colors of people are given a gift, and that gift must come back to the center of the circle to be shared with the other three around them. Then and only then -- then and only then."

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This transcription was edited by producer Tom Law for spelling, extraneous conversation, false starts and noise interruptions. The text may be used for research and educational purposes only. All additional uses require the expressed, advanced permission of the Living Archaeology Weekend Steering Committee, and the interviewee.

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