CHEROKEE INDIAN CRAFTSWOMEN
AND THE ECONOMY OF BASKETRY

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Cherokee, North Carolina did an eighteen million dollar tourist business in 1972. Much of this money went to outsiders who held leases on motels, restaurants, and tourist shops on the Qualla Boundary, land of the Corporation of the Eastern Band of Cherokee. Many of the tourists who came there to look at Indians saw little of the traditional Cherokee way of life; many bought souvenirs made in foreign lands, but some purchased genuine Cherokee craft items, such as beadwork, pottery, wood carvings, or basketry. Only those who purchased Cherokee baskets and carvings obtained traditional Cherokee crafts.

Wood carving is a vigorous Cherokee craft. Its styles have been reshaped by Mountain White models, by woodwork taught at boarding schools, and by cosmopolitan art.
It had persisted in the Birdtown area of Qualla and at the Snowbird Community in Tennessee, however, and has been re-established in all areas in recent decades. Cane basketry is particularly challenging to craftsmen because of its potential for great refinement and perfection in its execution and for elaboration of designs.

The second tradition, in rods and narrow splints of white oak, is derived from European origin. It is also found in White communities throughout the eastern United States. Known as rib baskets in the Southern Appalachians and as mending baskets in many other areas, such oval forms are woven upon a framework of rim and handle as their essential foundations. Some older Cherokee basket makers have worked in this technique since early childhood, growing up in households where this technology was the sole basketry tradition of their family. Others first learned cane techniques or broad oak splint techniques as the exclusive tradition of their families. Some

family industries included two or three of these separate traditions. At any rate, it appears that the rib basket technology had become fully developed as a Cherokee cottage industry by 1820. Rib baskets were already familiar to White buyers, and thus they generally preferred these splints to baskets in Indian styles. The manufacture of a good rib basket is time consuming and arduous, but its efficiency is attractive. All parts of the oak log are used in making a rib basket: the heartwood is split and shaved into two (whet) which would be waste in other basketry techniques; all of the sapwood, even that from inferior logs, can be used for the groove splints (warp). A rib basket has the necessary, producing the most basket for the smallest amount of wood with the least waste. Because good oak wood is still a valuable and scarce commodity, it is best to turn it into rib baskets, even though the labor is greater.

The third tradition, in broad oak splints, is probably an aboriginal one, although most scholars would dispute this claim. Broad oak splint baskets can be made only from the sapwood of white oak logs of first quality. They are of much lighter weight than rib baskets, but are equally durable. In earlier decades they were the only baskets made in the Big Cove, the most conservative and the highest and coolest mountain region of the Boundary. Such baskets find a good market today because they are attractive, useful, and extremely durable. Obtaining suitable white oak is a serious production problem.

It is generally said that it would be impossible to cut and work oak or ash into splints without metal tools. Experiments in taking out and working up oak contradict this assertion. A good stone-bladed axe, handled with skill rather than with brute force, cuts and pieces logs of the proper size as well as does a steel axe. The logs are split rather than chopped into bolts. A flint or a sandstone edge readily cuts a radial slit into the end of the log, and wooden or antler wedges ('guts') driven by a wood Maul ('club') quickly split the log through its length. Thus the log is split into eights ('bolts'). Each bolt then needs a small tangential notch shaved into its end at the juncture of heartwood and sapwood; careful driving of wooden wedges then splits the heart from the sapwood, 'harrowing out the bolt.' The "hearted-out bolt" is then split into "sticks" through the use of saved-in notches and the application of wooden wedges. Each stick is then separated into splints of annual growth
it as material for hammers or mauls. Sourwood is a valuable timber, but the hectar
from its flowers is worth even more as a food for bees; this becomes the most expensive
household food in the Carolina mountains. Good oak wood presents similar problems in
that it is scarce and that its prices are competitive.

We have many species of oak, all of them
good economic woods, but only a few are
suitable to basketry. The red oaks, black
oaks, and live oaks are commercial timber
and are valuable construction material. They
can be worked into fine baskets, but their weave
splints are fragile and non-durable. No Cherokeewould use them. The white oaks are
of multiple value. In earlier decades white oak
was split and smoothed into shingles, a Cherokee industry which brought
monetary returns but which depleted the stock of oak trees. Today the oak shingle
is no longer made because the raw materials are
gone. Oaks large enough for shingles, those
with thick enough sapwood, no longer exist.

White oak timber used to be invaluable
for ship building and as the best of cabinet
makers' woods; it no longer comes to such
markets. It was the wood of cooperers, and
most tuns, barrels, and kegs were split,
shaped, and joined from white oak. The
coopers' market today determines the price
of white oak. As this wood is made into barrels for the
aging of bourbon whiskey. Any mer-
chantable stand of oak is so valuable for the
manufacture of whiskey that no other mar-
ket can compete. Cherokee basket oak brings
a price equal to that of keg-wood, but comes
from scattered trees not suitable to the
distilleries. All other markets for white oak have
been priced out of competition.

Several species of white oak provide
good fiber-woods for basketry. Today's har-
vest is almost entirely very young stands of
the common white oak, Quercus alba L. Many
people objected to over-harvesting of white
oaks because the acorns are sweet and edible.

They provided porridge and breadstuffs
for humans and mast for bears and pigs. How-
ever, very few Cherokee eat acorn soup in
our age of affluence, and few hours have been
spent by hikers exploring the forest. People are losing their old methods for
harvesting acorns. Cherokee basket
makers now cut the young white oak before
the white knot companies can get to it.

Two other species, the post oak (Quercus
stel lost l L ) and the swamp white oak (Quercus
prinus L) were never common but
were universally recognized as ideal basket
woods. These trees usually grow in swamps
or on wet land, never become large, and have
dense, straight, strong sapwood which pro-
vides perfect material for broad splint bas-
kets. Few baskets have been made of this
wood because of its scarcity. Anyone hesi-
tates to cut these oaks for wood because
their acorns, though tiny, are very sweet and
nourishing. The seeds are more valuable than
the lumber. Their acorns used to be called
"cheese nuts" in Georgia.

Thus any Cherokee fortunate enough to
have such oaks growing on his property con-
sumed them, refused to cut them for basket
wood, maintaining them as a food resource.
However, most are now gone, cut and stolen
by trespassers who took them to sell. Per-
nimmon, holly, walnut, and other valuable
timbers have likewise been depleted. These
oaks have also been plucked out of the land on
their protectors. In a crowded modern world
of commercial values, few persons can con-
serve the resources of their ancestral land,
nor can they control the commercial competi-
tion for forest products. Prices for usable
white oak and cane have become oppressive
to the crafts person.

Most oak is harvested on the Boundary.
Individual Indians have possession holdings
of tribal land. Some are fortunate to have oak.

Disagreement exists as to whether there is
enough oak available on tribal land to supply
needs. Many of the oak baskets on the Boundary
show signs of having been notched slightly
with an ax; this is certain evidence that they
have been tested and found unsuitable for
basket material. Anyone seeing such a scar
will pass by the tree.

Many women do not find it worthwhile
to travel long distances for suitable oak
which must be purchased, cut, and trans-
ported. Instead, they prefer to buy logs from
dealers who deliver materials on order. At
least one of these suppliers is a White busi-
nessman from Bryson City. The going rate for
a log varies; some pay $1.25; others pay less.
The grain of the log is carefully examined
before it is purchased.

Women faced with shortages of oak
have sometimes turned to other materials
such as willow or maple. Willow baskets
made by Cherokees are scarce; most of
these seen in shops on the Boundary are
imports from the Mediterranean. As early as
1918, at least one Cherokee woman was
experimenting with maple. At the time she
was pregnant and was unable to travel the
distance nor to perform the physical labor
necessary to prepare oak. Maple is inferior
as a basket material because it is not
durable. Because of its inherent weakness it
has been largely untouched on many areas of the
eastern United States. Thus, if it is plentiful and
women have increasingly turned their atten-
tion to it. It takes a dvy well and results in
brighter colors than one finds on oak. Thus
it catches the eye of tourists. Furthermore,
less energy and strength are required to pre-
spare the splints. Since fewer hours are spent
in preparation, the sale price of a maple
basket may be slightly lower than that of an
oak basket, or since the maple basket appeals
to tourists, it may sell for the same price as
its oak equivalent. Thus, an Indian woman
working totally in maple may show more profit
per hour than her counterpart working
in oak. One craftswoman began adding
decorative maple loops to oak broad split
baskets on the Boundary. A basket offered to
a tourist without the weaving of warp, weft, and handle is
completed. The baskets resemble Easter
baskets sold commercially in most parts of the
Eastern United States, but the technique was
probably borrowed from Iroquois basket
makers in New York. The woman hopes
to retain most of the strength of the oak
while increasing the appeal of her baskets.
Women recognize that the flints are nearly
impossible to protect from dust and that the
maple loops will break off long before the
basket is worn out. Insertion of the loops or
flints unavoidably weakens the strength of the
weave. Nevertheless, other craftswomen,
noticing the popularity of such baskets and
the praise they bring, are tempted to follow
the innovator's example. The average tourist
is attracted to the bright colors and the
apparent skill in attaching the intricate loops.
They do not realize that such a basket is less
durable than the less decorative broad split
oak basket. Perhaps it would not matter to
them even if they knew, since most baskets
purchased by tourists are destined to become
show pieces rather than utility baskets. Of
all the baskets made at Cherokee the well con-
structed broad split oak basket is the best able
to take heavy use. If protected from dampness or carefully dried to prevent mill-
neries, the vines run on the ground and
are almost constant service for many years.

Some women, not wishing to undertake
time consuming work with oak broad splits, have
turned to Japanese honeymoons. This
vine was introduced to North America by
William Bartram in the late eighteenth century and
is found on much of the Boundary. The material
can readily be obtained and prepared by a
woman. The vine runs on the ground and
can be easily cut with a pocket knife. It is
then tied together and put in a pot to boil. Following
this the bark can be rubbed off with a rag.
The vines are then washed in cold water and
If a crafts worker is using cane, she is able to obtain four slender strips from a stalk. She must cut precisely, easing her way through the joints and buds which occur approximately every eight inches, or the splint will break and be useless. She must also gather dye stuffs and spend several hours boiling her splints in dye. Once the splints have cooled, she is prepared to begin weaving. Dry splints must be moistened or soaked to make them pliable.

The earliest archaeological evidence for cane basketry is more than 2000 years old. All early ethnographic examples in cane were dyed. In the nineteenth century oak and cane baskets were used for trade. Nineteenth century technology at Cherokee includes both Mountain White and Indian traditions. The Mountain White rib baskets of oak, made partly from heartwood, had been fully incorporated into Cherokee technology. Indian traditional baskets of oak and cane included hominy sieves, trays, fish creels, and pack baskets. The art of making double-weave baskets from cane was lost by 1890.

Mrs. Lottie Stamper learned about
Double-weave baskets in 1940 from an anthropology student, Virginia Hunter, who supplied data on Houna baskets from Louisiana and showed Mrs. Stamper photographs of a British Museum specimen which was a Cherokee double-weave basket of the 1750's. Mrs. Stamper figured out how to make double-weave baskets and demonstrated the technique to a number of other women. Several basket makers now produce widely admired double-weave baskets.

Most women hunt for natural dyes. Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Incorporated, known locally as the Qualla Cooperative, or the Coop, pays less for baskets colored with commercial dye, thus discouraging its use. Women rely heavily on walnut bark or walnut root and butternut root. Yellow root (Zanthoxylum) has been nearly exterminated on the Boundary; some say that it fades more readily than other natural dyes. Bloodroot (Sanguinaria) must be obtained during the spring when the plant can be seen. It can be stored in the ground in sand, but this technique is nearly lost. Women report difficulty in re-locating the bloodroot and frequently discover that insects have destroyed it. Increasingly they have turned to dried bloodroot which is easier to preserve. The Qualla Cooperative sells dried bloodroot and also sells handles at cost.

Men frequently obtain materials, carve handles, take baskets to markets, and bargain over prices. However, I know of only one man who was regarded as a skilled basket maker. At the Cherokee basket making is the work of women. Skills are involved in weaving baskets; achieving symmetrical designs demands foresight and careful measuring; producing a basket which is firm and not cobbled requires practice. A number of girls in their teens are good basket makers. Some complain that basket making is hard work or breaks their fingers, but basketry is a popular high school elective. Some girls recognize it as a way to earn pocket money. I know of one teenager who bought her car and supports it from money made selling baskets, and of three others, still in their teens, who have small children and rely on basketry as a major source of income. Except for the very young or very old, some from all age groups find it financially worthwhile to carry on the tradition.

The types of baskets being made reflect changing markets. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, basketry was a cottage industry. Women sold baskets to local storekeepers for $0.50 to $1.00. The baskets sold were utilitarian. They were mainly market baskets, but some were sashes, winnowing trays, fish creels, pack baskets, and clothes hampers. By the early 1900's new basket types were being made. Honeysuckle technique was introduced from Virginia in 1926. Since 1940 market baskets, varieties such as ribs baskets and pine needle baskets, have been made. The wood basket of the 1920's has become the magazine basket of the 1960's and 1970's. Mountain White rib baskets and pine needle baskets are modified into pocketbooks. Wall pockets and honesuckle baskets and mats, as well as miniature oak baskets, are sold to tourists for much less than the twenty to forty dollars a standard basket would normally bring. Cane baskets, particularly double weaves, and large cane mats sell for much more. Miniature cane baskets are difficult to make. The few that are made are show pieces, demonstrations of skill, not made for the tourist trade.

There is a delicate balance between what the tourist will buy and what the crafts woman can receive for her efforts. The baskets must move, if she is to make a profit. At the Cooperative shop, a woman normally receives half the sales price of her basket, according to its manager. In addition, members earn shares and receive dividends. These are not paid by other shops. Most crafts workers agree that selling baskets there brings the best price, although some say that it pays more only when it meets certain types of baskets. The tribe estimated that in 1972 the combined sales of crafts in other shops on the Qualla Boundary equalled craft sales at the Cooperative.

Some well-known basket makers take orders and occasionally sell baskets to tourists who seek them out. A woman in this enviable position sells a basket for half again as much as the Qualla Cooperative would pay; thus, the basket maker earns more than the Coop pays, and the buyer also saves money and has the pleasure of meeting and talking with the crafts woman.

Three fine basket makers demonstrate their work at the Occonaltee Indian Village Museum, where they receive wages plus a commission on their baskets. One of these women has been asked to be in a movie on basketry as part of an oral history project of a Florida college. She also gives classes in basketry in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Two of the three women have set up demonstrations at the Coop. One won a prize at the Cherokee Fair a few years ago for innovative material used in basketry; her entry was made of basswood bark. These women are justly proud...
of their baskets.

Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Incorporated, was established in 1946. Initially it operated on a small scale with Mrs. Gertrude Flanagan of the Home Economics Department of the Cherokee High School (BIA) packaging and shipping sales items. A conference room in the BIA agency became the sales area. In the early 1950's a small sales area was set up in the tribally owned Boundary Tree Motel. In those days $100, in sales made a big day according to Betty Ann DuPree, present manager of the Cooperative. The tribe gave the Qualla Cooperative land. They built a modern building in which to sell crafts and are now planning an extension. In 1971, according to tribal reports, total sales amounted to $121,179 with $68,618 being paid out to members for their craft items and dividends. There are currently 260 members, some of whom are sixty-two years old and are therefore drawing out equity shares. Approximately 150 members are actively producing craft items. Of these an estimated sixty-five are basket makers. The youngest member, who made baskets, was seventy years old in 1979.

Those eligible to apply for membership in the Cooperative include Cherokees on the tribal roll and Indians married to Cherokees on the roll. Candidates submit five pieces of their best work to be evaluated by several members of the Qualla Cooperative executive committee. Members on this committee excel in various crafts; each is recognized for his particular craft on the Boundary and in some cases nationally. The Qualla Cooperative encourages standards of excellence in crafts.

Despite this, the basket making of today is probably not equal to that of past years. Craftwomen produce baskets as rapidly as possible to meet the demands of tourism. They make a larger number of inexpensive baskets because these sell well and yield more profit than larger baskets. They make more rib baskets because this enables them to use the heartwood which would otherwise go to waste. They turn increasingly to maple because it is abundantly available and makes a pretty basket; yet they recognize that maple baskets do not have the strength of oak. They put decorative maple loops, which do not last, on oak baskets, since the flirs appeal to tourists. Thus, the tourists, who keep the craft alive, contribute to its defects.

Cherokees respond to market pressures. To make baskets appear functional, they give them utilitarian names such as pocketbooks or letter holders. They know a tourist is more apt to buy a basket if she can think how to use it. However, they privately wonder how many people pay thirty dollars for a waste basket and use it to hold trash.

Thirty years ago when basket prices were low and people were beginning to travel increasing distances for materials, the craft seemed doomed. But no one fully predicted the development of major highways leading into Cherokee and the resulting tourist boom. Tourism thrust Cherokee into a cash economy. Basket prices have only kept even with inflation. In 1946 a woman received approximately a day’s wage by local standards for a well-constructed oak basket. By today’s standards a Cherokee woman still receives approximately a day’s wages for such a basket. However, since she can sell many more baskets, she receives many more days’ pay than she could have in 1946. Women can now sell baskets to the shops and Cooperative in the off-seasons, thus having a year round income. For the first time it may be possible for a woman to make a living for herself and her family through basketry. Thus, the balance between increasing costs of scarce supplies and improved markets has actually tilted in favor of the basket maker and in favor of the craft’s survival.