

A Good Day to Make the Baskets

“She walks down a well worn path, a path many before her who make the baskets have walked. She moves gracefully for her 87 years on the Qualla Boundary. She walks with the pride of the Cherokee Nation. She walks on the land her people were forced from on the Trail of Tears. She walks a time worn path leading down to the river, a path many women before her have walked to gather the cane - to make the baskets. Although her hands are stiff and calloused with age and use, today she walks with purpose. Today is the day she will honor her ancestors and make the baskets in the old way. She takes notice of the tall grasses dancing in the warm summer wind. She hears them whispering the names of those that walked the path in days gone by; the ones who passed by on their way to the river’s edge. Although the sun is high in the sky, it’s not far now. The cane should be as tall and strong as her grandson who follows her this fine day. His sharpened knife is thirsty and eager to cut the cane for the fine baskets she will make. She will tell him many stories of his father while they work along the banks of the lazy Oconoluftee River. She stops suddenly on the path, her knees nearly folding beneath the traditional long skirt she wears. Her heart, which had been racing with excitement only moments before, sinks to the path upon which she now stands. Tears roll down the creases of her face. She is frozen in shock and disappointment and refuses to brush the tear from her face. The cane no longer stands in its muddy bed beside the river, and the path becomes yet another trail of tears for the Cherokee.”

Just as the Cherokee language has slowly begun its virtual exit among the A-ni-yv-wi-yah, so too, have the natural resources of which many of their ancient crafts are made. Not only is the cherished river cane needed for traditional Cherokee baskets slipping away, but also the

river clay used by tribal potters, white oak, and many other natural resources are following as well. The cultural traditions of our tribe are being seriously challenged by the shortage of resources, and this imbalance is impacting our Native artists. In the past, traditional tribal practices ensured a respectful use of area resources. Weavers, carvers, and basket makers find it impossible to separate the environment of the Qualla Boundary from the art they create. It is because of this that the Cherokee are initiating protective measures and revitalization of important resources. Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR) is a grant making program whose purpose is to assist the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians restore the balance between maintaining and using natural resources. The mission of the initiative is to teach, protect and promote Cherokee traditional art, resources and land, for present and future generations.

Part of moving forward includes understanding why the crisis has come to the people of the Cherokee tribe. With the opening of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934, many Cherokee families wove complex, beautiful baskets and sold them to park visitors as a means of keeping food on their tables. Times were tough, jobs few, and this resource allowed tribal family members to share their cultural knowledge with one another, and in doing so, kept their artistic traditions thriving. Development, agriculture, and tourism, although greatly beneficial to the tribe, took its toll on the environment. To make the traditional artisans work even more challenging was a serious blight affecting butternut (an important dye plant in much of the weaving arts) which occurred. This blight inhibited the traditional methodologies of craft dyeing.

Prosperity and economic advancement created a subtle blow to the artisan community of the Cherokee. When Cherokee artistic production was no longer an economic necessity, all

remaining weavers were elders of the tribe. The trend of choosing non-artisan careers threatened the cultural fabric of the tribe. In Native American communities, art is as much a part of the culture as is the practice of using the tribal language. The Cherokee Preservation Foundation began providing grants to bring elders and younger members of the tribe together to combat this turn. In 2000, only two members of the EBCI were regularly creating double-weave baskets, but with the help of RTCAR funding over the past decade, 16 of the 24 artists now working in double-weave learned their craft at Cherokee High School. Additional efforts have come forth to engage the Cherokee people in peer-to-peer sharing, promoting the Cherokee as experts and teachers in the art form, Cherokee culture and art education, and connecting Cherokee artisans with groups that are engaged in their own preservation efforts.

“I rely on moments of personal inspiration for my art. There have been times when the inspiration is there but, the materials I need are not readily available or easily found. It is much harder now to find the natural materials I need, when I want them, than many years ago. Often, once I have located them, the inspiration I started with has left me.” (Lex Owl, Cherokee Artist)

The natural resource strategy involves mapping existing stands of river cane, expanding acreage and access to natural materials through land protection and stewardship, incorporating RTCAR’s priorities in existing plans and research, and creating a clearinghouse to connect artisans and necessary resources.

In the real and current fight to preserve the artisan culture of the Cherokee Nation, more can still be done. The internet provides to us a vital opportunity to reach outside the perimeters of the reservation, and beyond the tourists who visit the Eastern Band in order to reach new venues of commerce in which to introduce the Native artists of our community. In addition, a

resource sharing bank might be established among the artist themselves, and those of other Southeastern tribes facing like challenges. Tribal governments, schools, and community service organizations can be educated regarding this crisis of culture and become partners in its salvation.

“Grandmother, the cane still grows a little further down the path; let us walk together and you will see. Our people are finding ways to protect it for you and the others who make the baskets. Dry your tears, today is indeed, a good day to make the baskets. Let me take your arm; we will walk this path together for many years to come, and when I am an elder like you, I will walk it still, and I will tell my grandchildren many stories of their grandmother. A soft smile comes across her weathered brown face, the tears stop, and they walk farther down the path. They have come to a healthy stand of river cane. It is a good day to make the baskets.”

Works Cited

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