

NATIVE SOIL

A CHEROKEE ARCHAEOLOGIST DIGS INTO HIS OWN HERITAGE

Russell Townsend

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I was born a citizen of the Cherokee Nation in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1966 and grew up in the home of my Cherokee parents. While they were not Cherokee speakers, my paternal grandparents spoke the language fluently. A few of my maternal relatives also were Cherokee speakers; I never made a visit to family without hearing some Cherokee spoken. However, as a child, I never really thought about being Cherokee, or my Cherokee heritage making me unique.

The history and heritage of the “Five Civilized Tribes” was thoroughly integrated into the fabric of eastern Oklahoma in those days. Most of the people we knew were Indian to some degree, or married to an Indian, or lived next door to an Indian. I took it for granted that being Cherokee, or Creek, or Choctaw was part of being human, something akin to having skin. We attended Cherokee ceremonies and activities with family and neighbors, and I did not recognize that these things were not done by everybody.

When I began junior high school, I realized that not everyone was Cherokee. I came to understand this fact because I had responsibilities as a Cherokee that many of my non-Indian friends did not have; I came to view many traditional activities like they were piano lessons or some other undeserved punishment.

Throughout my life, both my mother and father reminded me that I was Cherokee in ways both subtle and direct. When I was very young, I went through a phase where I very much wanted to be a samurai and Japanese. My father never encouraged this fantasy. He would shake his head, and with no humor whatsoever, he would say “You are Cherokee. Why would you want to be anything else?”

I loved reading history. My dad had many books about the Cherokee Nation, and I read them all. I felt that I knew this history like the back of my hand, and I believe that it was this love of history that prompted me to consider archaeology as a career. During high school, I found a copy of Bennie Keel’s

book *Cherokee Archaeology*; it became one of my favorites. I didn’t understand all of it at the time, but the fact that one could dig into the earth and reconstruct Cherokee history that was never recorded in history books was a very exciting concept to me. I knew then that it was something I wanted to learn how to do.

I began my college education at Oklahoma State University (OSU), where they had no anthropology department or degree. I chose OSU because seemingly all of my family had attended school there, and the University of Oklahoma (OU) was universally loathed by almost everyone I loved and respected. I enrolled in several anthropology courses that were offered through the Sociology Department, and one of my Professors, Dr. Don Brown, encouraged me to pursue an anthropology degree. On his advice, I betrayed my entire family and transferred to OU. If it hadn’t been for Don Brown’s encouragement, I might be an accountant and wealthy today. Hindsight is 20/20, they say.

The summer before I transferred to OU, I attended an archaeological field school at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. I learned all that I could about archaeological field techniques, and Bob Mishler was an excellent teacher. When I started coursework at OU, I had all the swagger and bravado of a veteran “shovel bum.” Many of my classmates at OU thought I knew it all when it came to archaeology. I encouraged this misconception, but nonetheless, I did have a lot to learn about the discipline (and still do), and I received good instruction from Dr. Richard Pails and Dr. Susan Vehik.

One of the best things that happened to me while attending OU was getting a job as a lab tech at the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey (OAS). For nearly the entire two years that I was at OU, I worked twenty hours a week writing tiny catalogue numbers on artifacts from throughout the entirety of the archaeological record of the state. I also was surrounded by many professional archaeologists employed in the public



EBCI equipment operator Clarence Murphy, former Historic Sites Keeper Jerry Dugan, and THPO Russ Townsend discuss excavation process at an EBCI project site.

rather than academic sector, who were all friendly and encouraging and willing to share what they had learned. I know I was fortunate to be there, and I still feel the benefits from that experience to this day.

I received my B.A. in anthropology from OU in 1989 and almost immediately enrolled in graduate studies at the University of Tulsa (TU). While at TU, I was urged by Dr. Garrick Bailey to investigate Cherokee archaeology, and I constructed my master's studies around an investigation of Cherokee log structures. I also was able to work as a contract archaeologist for Dr. George Odell, who was as much a mentoring figure to me as anybody in my career.

I received my M.A. in 1993 and contented myself doing contract archaeology on a regular basis. I considered my academic studies complete, and so I was surprised to find myself in a conversation at the 1995 Southeastern Archaeological Conference about pursuing a Ph.D. at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). Dr. Brett Riggs, then a Ph.D. candidate at UTK, had studied Cherokee archaeology under Dr. Gerald Schroedl, and encouraged me to do the same. In my mind, no one knew more about Cherokee archaeology than Brett, so when Brett said UTK was the place to study Cherokee archaeology, I was ready to believe him.

I enrolled at UTK in 1996 and enjoyed my instruction. Gerald Schroedl was as helpful as Brett had suggested. I was given the opportunity to teach some classes as a teaching

assistant; those were some of my favorite experiences. However, after just three semesters, I was asked by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) to serve as the Director of the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, a Tribally owned facility in Vonore, Tennessee. I accepted the job and worked there for two years while I finished my coursework at UTK.

After leaving the museum, I worked with Brett Riggs for a short time documenting Trail-of-Tears sites in the North Carolina mountains. I also managed to pass my doctoral examinations. However, after less than a year, I was once again employed by the EBCI, this time as the Deputy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) for the Tribe. Three years later, in 2004, I replaced James Bird as the THPO, after he accepted a position with the National Park Service.

In 1999, the National Historic Preservation Act was amended to allow federally recognized Indian tribes to establish historic preservation offices in the same manner as states, and assume the same responsibilities on tribal land. In 2001, the EBCI was one of the first Indian tribes to form a Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO). I was hired that same year, and I can say without shame that all my education and work experience up to that point had not fully prepared me to do this job.

To function as a THPO, one must be very conversant with federal cultural resource law. When I began this job, I was not. I had had one course on the subject of federal cultural resource law that seemed to focus on National Register nominations. I knew the names of these laws, and I knew that they mandated some archaeology associated with federal undertakings, but I had no idea how to use these laws to protect Cherokee archaeological sites. Again, nothing in my past experience had prepared me for the politically charged negotiations of the federal consultation process. I was a complete neophyte when it came to negotiating scopes-of-work, long-term site and burial protection, and public education. All of this had to be learned on the job.

On a day-to-day basis, the EBCI expects me, as THPO, to protect Cherokee archaeological sites, not only on the 56,000 acres of current tribal land, but also on those lands that at one time or another comprised the Cherokee Nation in the East, which includes portions of eight states. We accomplish this by utilizing federal cultural resource law. We have a staff of six people in our office; job duties are largely associated with a particular cultural resource law. Our Preservation Specialist reviews every federal undertaking in our eight-state region to make sure that the compliance archaeology meets our Tribal standards. The Tribal Archaeologist does much of

the fieldwork on our Tribal land, and oversees our larger projects to ensure that they are accomplished to our Tribal standards. Our NAGPRA and Repatriation Officer brings home our honored dead and reburies them according to their original wishes. The Historic Sites Keeper monitors and maintains historic and archaeological sites on our Tribal land. We have an Assistant who helps where help is most needed. And finally there is me. I administrate and supervise, and I get to do a little bit of everything.

There is no such thing as a typical day for me. On any given day, I may be doing archaeological fieldwork; consulting with some federal agency about site investigation or protection; teaching a class on Cherokee history or culture; visiting sites of ongoing Cherokee archaeology; lobbying tribal, state, or federal politicians; paying the light bill; or any number of other tasks. Some days, I end up having to do all these tasks, one after the other. I rarely know what my work day may consist of, or where it may require me to travel, but the job stays interesting and rewarding.

The job may not pay a lot, but it is truly personally gratifying. As a Cherokee, I feel that almost every aspect of my job allows me to preserve some vital piece of our unique Cherokee identity. For those of you who are not Cherokee, that may not make much sense, but the fact of the matter is that Indian tribes have had to fight, struggle, and sacrifice to remain in existence. If we lose those things that make us uniquely Cherokee, then we betray all that our ancestors suffered to give to us. I would be ashamed not to contribute to their long battle to remain Cherokee. Our unique identity is the gift the Creator gave to us and it would be very rude not to carry it forward.

My most rewarding experience to date has been my association with the Ravensford Project. As I began this job, the EBCI and the NPS were beginning what would become a long and bitter negotiation over land that had been promised to the tribe in 1940, and was now needed for construction of a new dynamic three-school campus for our Tribal children. The details of this negotiation and resultant land exchange are too involved to detail here, but in the end, the EBCI succeeded in obtaining the land known as the Ravensford Tract. Archaeological sites had been identified on the property and federal law would require the Tribe to mitigate damages to those resources before school construction could start. The THPO, in consultation with the NC SHPO and National Park Service, developed an archaeological scope-of-work to the highest standards. We included research questions that specifically targeted Cherokee Tribal interests. Finally, the Tribe paid for the totality of the fieldwork at a project price of

over seven million dollars. The Ravensford project has become the largest archaeological project in North Carolina history, and it has truly been a Cherokee project.

The icing on the cake...I got to become good friends with Bennie Keel of the National Park Service, the very archaeologist whose book on Cherokee archaeology put me on the road to where I am today. Sweet, sweet, serendipity.

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resource management operate was a valuable lesson that helped me land other positions, including jobs in three more state preservation offices. These public sector jobs taught me that archaeology is very dependent on public support, and yet we archaeologists are generally unprepared, upon graduation, to deal with the public.

So never stop learning. The most valuable training I received came to me after I began my current job. Frustrated by how little I knew about communicating effectively with the public, despite having been involved in "public archaeology" for decades, I enrolled in certification programs offered by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI). NAI is the main professional organization for park interpreters, but also they are willing to teach boring archaeologists how to emotionally and intellectually connect various audiences with cultural resources. I believe that all archaeologists in whatever area they practice would benefit from learning how to communicate interpretively. I suppose I knew this intuitively when I was six, after that park ranger at Mesa Verde, undoubtedly an interpretive ranger, captured my imagination and set me on my archaeological path. It only took me 50 years to fully understand.