50th ANNIVERSARY EXHIBIT

Celebrating 50 years of the Cherokee National Historical Society

Weave through 50 years of history and memorabilia of the Cherokee National Historical Society including the Tsalagi Village, Trail of Tears Drama, and Cherokee National Museum. Also, help celebrate the 50th Anniversary with a visit to Diligwa – a new 1710 Cherokee Village – now open.
Cherokee National Historical Society, Inc
50th Anniversary

Celebrating 50 years of our mission of Preserving, Promoting and Teaching Cherokee History and Culture.

This publication was made possible by

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Cherokee National Historical Society, Inc. Timeline

1963 – Cherokee National Historical Society Inc. is formed.


1969 – Amphitheater opens with the Trail of Tears Drama.

1972 – 1st Trail of Tears Art Show opens in the Amphitheater.


1978 – Ho-Chee-Nee Trail of Tears Memorial Prayer Chapel opens.

1979 – Adam’s Corner Rural Village opens.

1982 – Col. Hagerstrand steps down as Executive Vice President after 2 decades of service.

1995 – 1st Cherokee Homecoming Art Show opens.

2001 – Trail of Tears Exhibit opens.

2005 – The last Trail of Tears Drama is performed.

Chief J. B. Milam

J. B. Milam, Cherokee Nation Principal Chief from 1941-49, wanted to create a memorial and heritage center for the Cherokee people, and the perfect place was where the original Cherokee National Female Seminary stood. He would try during all four terms as chief to obtain the sites of the original Cherokee National Female Seminary and the Murrell Home.

His inquiries did not just come from his position as chief, but also came from his connections with the Cherokee Seminary Student Association as well as the Oklahoma Historical Society. While he was unable to purchase the land, the idea did not die with him. His successor, Chief W. W. Keeler would keep his dream alive by helping to create the Cherokee Heritage Center at the exact location where Milam had originally intended.

Jesse Bartley Milam, commonly known as J.B., served as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1941 to his passing in 1949. Chief Milam is one of eight chiefs appointed by the president of the United States. Chief Milam was also an oilman and president of the Bank of Chelsea, the first bank in the Cherokee Nation.
The Cherokee National Historical Society, Inc. was formed in 1963 by a group of interested Cherokees and other civic leaders. The chosen site was a 44 acre wooded area that had once been the site of the Cherokee National Female Seminary and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Seminary was authorized by the Cherokee Council in 1846 and was the first higher education institution for women west of the Mississippi River. The Female Seminary burned in 1887 and the three surviving columns from the original structure now serve as the centerpiece for the museum. Along with the adjacent Cherokee Hall of Fame sculpture garden, these columns serve as a perpetual reminder of Cherokee accomplishments. The location is referred to collectively as the Cherokee Heritage Center.
Colonel Martin Hagerstrand was reared in a Chicago orphanage, retired from the army, and married Marion Brown, a Choctaw-Cherokee from Tahlequah. She was an officer in the Women’s Officer Corps during World War II, and Martin “adopted” Marion’s family as his own. He became interested in the history of the Cherokees because he lived in Tahlequah. He became president of the Chamber of Commerce and became friends with Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, William Wayne Keeler. Chief Keeler was also a far-sighted man who had similar ideas to Colonel Hagerstrand about Cherokee culture and heritage.

Hagerstrand (in light blue) looking over the Ancient Village construction in 1966

Picture of Hagerstrand from 1970 Trail of Tears Drama Program.
Chief W. W. Keeler

Chief Milam passed away in 1949 and shortly thereafter the Cherokee Executive Committee elected Milam’s friend W.W. Keeler to first serve as interim Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. He was soon appointed Chief by U.S. President Harry S. Truman. The Cherokee Nation held its tribal election in 1971 and Principal Chief William W. Keeler was elected by the Cherokee people. He served until 1975 when he decided not to seek re-election.

Keeler saw the vision Milam had for a historical and cultural center and assisted in the creation of the historical society with many other Cherokee leaders in 1963. Keeler served as CNHS Board President for over a decade.

Principal Chief Keeler dedicated twenty-six years toward preserving the culture, government, and self-sufficiency of his tribe, working unpaid and tirelessly in this position to help the nation through the era of Termination and into a time of Self-Determination. The creation of the Cherokee National Historical Society was one of his goals to bring pride and respect back to the Cherokee people.
The Columns

The 3 columns out front of the museum are the remains of the Cherokee National Female Seminary that was built in 1851. It was the first school of higher education for women west of the Mississippi River, and the first to pay equal salaries to male and female instructors. Its curriculum was based on Mt. Holyoke in Massachusetts and the first principal, Ellen Whitmore, was a graduate of that school. Her salary was $800 per year plus board. The school burned on Easter Sunday, 1887. It was rebuilt on the north side of Tahlequah and reopened in 1889 and was the forerunner of Northeastern State University. The rebuilt seminary is today known as Seminary Hall.
Construction Zone

Actual work commenced on the site of the future Heritage Center on February 23, 1966. It was supervision by Col. Hagerstrand who had agreed to terminate his private business interests and work full-time on the project as General Manager. The Cherokee Foundation, a private charitable foundation was organized and largely maintained by Chief Keeler at Bartlesville, Oklahoma. The foundation agreed to underwrite his salary and expenses during the construction period.

In 1966, a formal design contract was negotiated with the architectural-engineering firm of Hudgins, Thompson, Ball and Associates, Tulsa, Oklahoma, which included a provision that Charles “Chief” Boyd would be the designer of the project. This project was done as a portion of his Masters thesis. Mr. Boyd and his family then moved to Tulsa from Colorado and joined the firm.
Location

The present site was chosen because it was the site of the original Cherokee Female Seminary. The state owned 20 acres surrounding the ruins. It was overgrown and largely ignored. The historical society purchased an adjoining 24 acre tract. This land was deeded to the State of Oklahoma who then provided the historical society with a long term lease to the 44 acre tract. Later, Phillips Petroleum gave the society approximately five acres across the front gate. In 2011, an agreement was reached with the state of Oklahoma and all the land is now owned by the historical society.

Original Chief Boyd Blueprints 1967

Maps of the Grounds

1966 Photo of the Grounds on the South Side.
Village Research

Col. Hagerstrand had begun research in Cherokee history and culture, first as a hobby in the late 1950’s, and on a more serious basis as early as 1962. Resource materials were available in the Cherokee Collection at Northeastern State College Library, a collection of papers and pamphlets at Gilcrease Institute in Tulsa, and pertinent reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution. The late Dr. Jack Frederick Kilpatrick, a noted scholar of Cherokee heritage and student of Cherokee history, then Professor of Music at Southern Methodist University, offered substantial guidance and technical advice during the planning period and during construction of the village. Date and descriptions developed by Drs. Kneberg and Lewis at the University of Tennessee were also helpful. Architect Boyd also researched the Cherokee past, with particular attention to structures, and arrived independently at a “format” for the ancient village which corresponded to previous concepts developed by Hagerstrand and Kilpatrick.
We Can Build It

Starting with a work crew of twelve full-blood Cherokees, the initial effort involved selective clearing of the jungle of vines, bushes and trees which covered the entire site. The crew filled the sink holes that had a century before been a small basement for the old seminary building, as well as excavating and salvaging foundation rock from the old seminary for later use. The force soon grew to four crews with up to 52 Cherokees employed. Village construction actually started in May, 1966 and continued for over a year. Hand labor, native materials and ancient methods were used in order to create the most authentic atmosphere possible.
Building Techniques

Wattle and daub is an ancient building technique used to make both the interior and exterior walls of their homes. Like weaving a basket, rivercane, wood, and vines are interwoven to form a frame. After the wattle is in place, it can be covered with daub, a plaster-like mixture of clay, sand, plants, and even animal dung. After the daub dries, fires are set within and around the structure to help harden the walls.

As an agriculturally-based people living in the Southeast, the Cherokee people needed permanent structures to shield them against cold winters and hot summers. Wattle and daub houses take a lot of effort to build but once completed, the houses are weather resistant and durable. The wattle and daub style served as the most functional style according to the regional materials and climate.
A three-month “villager” training program, conducted in cooperation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Northeastern Oklahoma State College, was instituted in the late Spring of 1967 using Sequoyah High School facilities. Fifty to sixty Cherokees were trained for the village cast and as guides.

“The old people still remember and praise the ancient days before they were acquainted with the whites, when they had but little dress, except a bit of skin about their middles, mockasons (sic), a mantle of buffalo skin for the winter, and a lighter one of feathers for the summer.”

“Henry Timberlake 1762

Wigs? One of the important values of the Ancient Village was to create an atmosphere that was accurate as possible. Many of the early villagers had short hair and management wanted everyone to have long hair so wigs were required for men and women. Wigs were used from 1967 through the early 1980’s. The villagers were to speak only Cherokee and the guide served as an interpreter if someone had a question.
Tsa-La-Gi Village Opening

The village at Tsa-La-Gi was dedicated and opened to the public on June 27, 1967, by Cherokee Nation Principal Chief and Historical Society President Keeler before an audience of over 5,000 people. He was assisted by a number of state dignitaries including Oklahoma Governor Dewey Bartlett, Sen. A. S. “Mike” Monroney, Congressmen Ed Edmondson and Page Belcher, and others. State Senate Pro-Tem Clem McSpadden, of Cherokee descent, participated as Master of Ceremonies. The village cast and guides showed the results of the training in the practices and history of the 17th Century culture.

The village represented a pre-contact pre-trade period around 1540. Guided tours allowed visitors to witness Cherokees performing daily tasks such as basket weaving, tool making, food preparation, and daily life. The structure of government, family and traditions of that time in Cherokee history was explained on the guided tour.
Master Artisans

Over the years, many people have worked in the village. Some have gone on to become master artisans. Each year Cherokee artists are selected to be honored and named Cherokee National Treasures or Wisdom Keepers for their lifelong pursuit of traditional Cherokee arts. Many of these individuals were villagers who learned and refined their skills by practicing and sharing their knowledge with other coworkers and guests. We are proud of the accomplishments of all of our past villagers and none-more than these master artisans. The following list are the National Treasures and Wisdom Keepers who worked in our Ancient Village and the year they were honored as master artisans.

William Cabbagehead 1989
Blowgun/Darts

Ella Mae Blackbear 1990 Basketry

Anna Rackliff 1991 Basketry

Scott Rackliff 1991 Flint knapper/Carving

Hastings Shade 1991
Carving/Gig Making

Betty Jo Smith 1991 Traditional Foods

Thelma Forrest 1992 Basketry

Noel Timothy Grayson 1993
Flint knapping/Bow making

Jess Oosahwee 1993 Blowgun/Darts

Lena Blackbird 1996 Basketry

Nadine Wilbourn 1997 Basketry

Bessie Russell 1999 Basketry

Kathy Van Buskirk 2004 Basketry

Perry Van Buskirk 2004 Bow making

Danny McCarter 2006 Blowgun/Darts

Rachel Dew 2006 Basketry
New Village

When designing the new Diligwa village, updated archaeological research was used that has been uncovered since the original 1967 research. Using archaeological evidence allows us to have a better understanding of the physical environment that Cherokee people created in the past. Updated information from excavations allows researchers to confirm information from historical texts on the physical appearance, composition, and construction of villages. Together, this helps to develop a richer environment for the study, understanding, and preservation of the Cherokee culture. Historical texts from 16th century Spanish accounts and 18th century European involvement provide information about village plans, locations, and daily life rituals.
Diligwa

Officially opened on June 3, 2013, the new outdoor living exhibit provides guests with an enhanced experience of authentic Cherokee life and history. Construction started in 2005 with a pair of homes in the original ancient village using new archaeological evidence to create the most authentic buildings possible.

The overall village includes eight residential sites, each with a Cherokee summer house and winter house, a corn crib, a “kitchen garden” and additional landscaping. The public complex consists of the primary council house and summer council pavilion overlooking a large plaza that serves as the center of community activity. In addition, two recreation areas featuring a marble field and stickball field will showcase the Cherokee games that are still played today.

The new outdoor living exhibit was funded by endowments from Cherokee Nation Businesses, the Tom J. and Edna Mae Carson Foundation, Mary K. Chapman Foundation, Gelvin Foundation and the Boyd Group.
The Amphitheater opened in 1969. It featured the “Trail of Tears” drama with a script by Dr. Kermit Hunter, who also wrote “Unto These Hills” performed in Cherokee, NC. Unto These Hills was the story of the Cherokees up to the Trail of Tears. Our “Trail of Tears” drama was a continuation of that play.

The Drama was theatre of the highest caliber, featuring professional actors and dancers from across the United States. The Amphitheater was at one time the world’s only outdoor air-conditioned theater. When the theater was built, the CNHS offices were moved from the Colonel’s basement to the theater offices. In 1971 it offered a multilanguage show for an audience composed of international parachutists.
Trail of Tears Drama

1960’s Drama Production

1980’s Drama Production

2004 Drama Production. Photographs by Brian Pollard
Other Performances

**Will Rogers: The Cherokee Kid**, by Earl Squyres was performed three nights per week in repertoire with the Trail of Tears Drama in 1979 and one night per week in 1980.

**Annie Get Your Gun**, by Irving Berlin, appeared in repertoire with the Jim Vance version of Trail of Tears in 1984.

**Under the Cherokee Moon** was performed from 2007-2010. Award-winning actor and storyteller Laurette Willis wrote and performed in the play. It brought the 1800s Indian Territory to life. “Revisit the days when the Cherokee Female Seminary stood on the grounds of the Cherokee Heritage Center.” Willis portrayed the Trail of Tears survivor, Seminary graduate and teacher Carrie Bushyhead, as well as missionary/teacher Sarah Worcester in this moving, interactive production.

The second act took you back another 100 years to 1776 for “Around Cherokee Council Fires,” performed in the Ancient Village. “There you can decide with the Cherokee leaders of the day whether or not to become involved in the war being fought between the British and the Colonists who continue to encroach on Cherokee lands.”

**Legends at Dusk** was performed in 2011 in the Ancient Village. Cherokee storytellers brought ancients legends alive and pulled out audience members to play out the adventures of jistu the rabbit, yona the bear and the little spider that brought fire to the Cherokee people.
Summer Performance Timeline

1969 – 1983  Trail of Tears, by Kermit Hunter

1984 – 1985  Trail of Tears, by Jim Vance

1986 – 1994  Trail of Tears, by Kermit Hunter

1995        No Performances

1996        Trail of Tears, by Kermit Hunter

1997        Trail of Tears: Nation by Joe Sears

1998 – 2000  No Performances

2001 – 2003  Trail of Tears, by Joe Sears

2004        Trail of Tears, by Layce Gardner

2005        Trail of Tears, by Richard Fields

2006        No Performances

2007-2010    Under the Cherokee Moon by Laurette Willis
               Performed in Ancient Village & Adams Corner

2011        Legends at Dusk by CHC Staff
               Performed in the Ancient Village

Currently    No Performances
The Cherokee National Museum opened in 1974. It was the first museum in the Cherokee Nation to be dedicated solely to the collection and display of Cherokee artifacts. Like the other facilities on our site, Charles “Chief” Boyd designed it. The building is in the style of the traditional Cherokee long house and incorporated Cherokee pottery motifs. The museum’s original exhibits were shown on a temporary exhibit plan. “Cherokee Legends,” a children’s exhibit, features the origin stories of hunting, corn, fire and medicine. Hands on activities were available. There were major design changes in 1983, 1995/96, and 2001.
Trail of Tears Art Show

Plans for a museum building were being drawn in the early 1970’s so the administration decided to start an annual art show. The Trail of Tears Art Show began in 1972 as a means of fostering the development of painting as a form of expressing the Native American heritage in the area of the Cherokee Nation. There were only two categories and every piece had to portray the Trail of Tears. The categories were contemporary and non-contemporary. The non-contemporary did not allow any shading. Initiated before the completion of the museum, the Art Show was held in the rain shelter of the Tsa La Gi theatre.

In 1974, it became the first major exhibition in the present museum. Over the years the show has expanded to nine categories, added sponsorship and professionalism, but it is still here because it never lost the fundamental purpose of supporting the artists and expressing our native culture. TOTAS is the longest running Native themed show in Oklahoma.
Trail of Tears Exhibit

In 2001, the National Park Service was retracing the original Trail of Tears and located exhibits in museums along the route with the finale exhibit housed at the Cherokee National Museum. The design of the 2,000 square foot Trail of Tears National Historic Trail Terminus Exhibit was completed in 1999 and the exhibit opened in May 2001.

The statues in the gallery were produced by Studio EIS pronounced “ice” in Brooklyn, NY. After establishing the number of figures needed, we began seeking models. The man and girl in the lead are the same two as in gallery one, Charlie Soap and Joanna Glass. To their right is councilman Johnny Keener. Behind them is a black woman as a reminder there were slaves on the Trail of Tears. Alongside her is a missionary and the model for that figure was someone the people in NY selected from that area. Behind them is Sam Watts-Scott the Curator of the Cherokee Heritage Center at the time of installation. The mother and children along the wall is Ruby Wells and children Brandon and Nekema. Studio EIS came to the costume shop behind the theater and had the models assume the desired pose. They then put a compound over their face and the person had to breathe through nasal tubes while it was setting. The real challenge for the children was to remain calm, but also hold a facial expression. The bodies were cast from stock figures in NY, with the cast faces added to them.
The passion for finding Cherokee heritage is one that has been strong with our guests for decades. Originally, guests looking for genealogy information would look through our National Archives, but with a steady increase of requests it was decided to create a new department just for those needing help finding their Cherokee ancestry. In 1997, the Cherokee Family Research Center (CFRC) was established and is dedicated to preserving Cherokee ancestry through its growing Cherokee Family Database. It houses a usable library with resources for Cherokee research staffed by qualified and experienced genealogists. Also created in 1997, the First Families of the Cherokee Nation is a program in which membership is offered by the CFRC to recognize those persons whose Cherokee ancestors were legal residents of the Cherokee Nation on or prior to September 6, 1839. This group meets each year during the Cherokee National Holiday. Each year the CFRC receives over 25,000 inquiries from around the globe looking for information about their Cherokee ancestry.
Nofire Heritage Farms

Nofire Heritage Farms is named for brothers Sam and Eli Nofire who cared for the gardens and animals at the Cherokee Heritage Center since the beginning days in the 1960s. Their combined service of more than fifty years is remembered and appreciated.

Sam started his time at the center when the museum was being built. Eli taught the Cherokee language to anyone and held weekly classes for staff. Eli also started the annual Gospel Sing that is held annually in May at the Cherokee Heritage Center that brings choirs and singers from the local community together for a day of sharing faith and talent.

An 1890’s farm typically would have historic breeds of farm animals like our two registered Cherokee ponies, Hawkeye and Sadie. Also at our farm are Pineywoods cattle, cousins of the Texas longhorns and found chiefly in the southern woodlands of Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. It was in their southern homelands that the Cherokees acquired this breed and used them to build a successful cattle industry. In the last sixty years the breed has become extremely rare. At one point we also housed buffalo and deer on the grounds. They were in a pen near the front gate. In the 1980’s they were adopted by other herds and the fencing was removed.
Ho-Chee-Nee Prayer Chapel

Other attractions include the Ho-Chee-Nee Prayer Chapel constructed in 1978. Jimalee Burton, a writer, poet, and artist, funded it as Memorial to Trail of Tears. The chapel incorporates symbolism such as seven beams converging on three uprights beams. These represent the seven clans of the Cherokees and the Holy Trinity. It also has original stained glass work representing the Trail of Tears and the Cherokee Female Seminary by local artist Jim Smythe.
Adams Corner Rural Village

In 1979 the Adams Corner Rural Village was added. The village is an 1890 Cherokee town designed to contrast with the Ancient Village. The buildings are representative of many Cherokee settlements of that time. Adams Corner Rural Village is a collection of seven buildings representing Cherokee life in the 1890’s before Oklahoma statehood.

K.S. “Bud” Adams, Jr. generously supported the construction and operation of Adams Corner Rural Village in memory of his mother, Blanch Keeler Adams. The replicated small settlement officially opened June 15, 1979. At first glance, 1890’s community life appears to be tranquil to our modern eyes. Yet, the era was actually a turbulent time as had been several other threatening decades such as the 1830’s with the Cherokee Trail of Tears, and the 1860’s with the Civil War as experienced by the Cherokee Nation. Alice Timmons also devoted much time and interest to the creation of the village.
Adams Corner Building Histories

School House
It is a replica of school houses of that era and was built based on photographs of schools. The Cherokee syllabary on the blackboard was painted by the late Cecil Dick, a Cherokee master artist. Most everything in the school house, like other buildings is a replica.

Frontier Home
The Samantha Bain Lucas home was originally built near Perkins, Oklahoma on land that was claimed in one of the Oklahoma Land Runs. In 1990, Ms. Marg Crumbaker, a great-granddaughter of Samantha Bain Lucas, acquired the home and had it moved to the Rural Village.

General Store
Like the School House, the store is replicated from photographs. Both structures used lumber from the Stapler Homes in Tahlequah when those homes were dismantled.

Log Cabin
The cabin came from a site near Lost City and pre-dates the Trail of Tears. In 1979, our staff disassembled the structure and reassembled it on this site.

Smoke House
It is a replica, but has been used by our staff to smoke meats.
(Not Pictured)

Church
This was formerly the Log Cabin Florist Shop in Tahlequah. The property was located at 501 S Muskogee Ave. We were able to acquire and reassemble the building.

White House
This house stood behind the Log Cabin Florist Shop and was acquired in the same transaction. It is intended to show the lifestyle of a merchant or more prosperous member of the community. The lifestyle of the very wealthy may be seen south of here at the Murrell Home.