

Immense Collection of Chickasaw Artifacts Acquired by Tribe

By Richard Green

The largest collection in the world of predominately 18th century Chickasaw artifacts was acquired by the Chickasaw Nation last month. The collection had been in the possession of three Tupelo, Mississippi, area collectors. The collections, temporarily stored in boxes, each encompasses approximately six feet by six feet by four feet high.

When the three individual collections became available simultaneously, Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby said he felt obligated to bring the tens of thousands of artifacts back under tribal control. "By acquiring the collection, the material is now consolidated under our control," Anoatubby said. "Otherwise, in all likelihood, the artifacts eventually would have been sold to various collectors throughout the world. We intend to learn all we can from these materials about how our ancestors lived and adapted to the changing circumstances in tribal life."

The artifacts consist of the durable materials of Chickasaw life from the late 1600s to the removal period in the late 1830s. Many artifacts were made by Chickasaws from natural materials, such as shell, clay, stone and gems. These include arrow and spear points, gun flints and deerhide scrapers, pipes, pottery fragments and costume decorations.

However, the majority of the artifacts were European made and were used or adapted both for functional and decorative purposes. Primarily, these include glass objects such as bottles, mirrors and a large variety of thousands of glass trade beads; ceramic fragments; silver decorative objects; and metal tools, including musket and pistol parts and ammunition, hoes, axes and assorted cooking ware.

The collections were obtained from the three major collectors in the Tupelo area, Steve Cook, a civil engineer, Julian Riley, a retired certified public accountant, and Buddy Palmer, who recently retired from the family grocery business. Riley said that the three owned probably about 80 percent of the Chickasaw artifacts in the hands of Tupelo-area collectors.

Most of the artifacts came from 18th century Chickasaw village sites, and were either found within graves or in pits (called middens) that were used for trash. Upon death, many Chickasaws from this time period traditionally were buried under their houses with their favored objects that were selected to accompany them to the afterlife. According to Gov. Anoatubby's policy, these burial items are considered sacred and will not be on public display.

Material from the trash pits is not considered sacred and may be displayed. While some material normally thought of as grave goods has been found in middens (such as trade beads), most items include large amounts of pottery fragments and pieces of metal objects, such as broken hoes and axes, animal bones and various "killed" items, meaning they were deliberately broken or destroyed.

Most of the items have little financial value in and of themselves, but Gov. Anoatubby said their value to the Chickasaw Nation is priceless both in large and small ways. For example, there is a French grenade recovered from the remnants of the Chickasaw village of Ogoula Tchetoka, which was attacked by French-led forces in March 1736.

The man who found it believed it was a (Civil War) cannonball, but Cook thought otherwise because it had a hole in it for a fuse. Moreover, after the man told Cook where he'd found the iron ball, Cook knew it was Ogoula Tchetoka. From accounts of the battle that he had read Cook knew that French grenadiers had participated. "Some of the powder was still in the grenade," said Cook. "It had not exploded perhaps because after it was hurled over the wall of the village's protective fort, a Chickasaw had yanked out the fuse before it could detonate."

Eventually all of the artifacts will be stored in the new Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur. Although the burial items will not be on display, replicas of selected artifacts are expected to be part of the museum's exhibit. Furthermore, Gov. Anoatubby said it may be possible for Chickasaw citizens to view the collection in private. Scholars also may apply for access to the collection, although no invasive or destructive testing on the funerary objects will be permitted. Persons with comments on these matters should address them to Kirk Perry, administrator of heritage preservation.

The collectors found most of the artifacts during the 1960s and '70s, when the city of Tupelo was expanding. Housing and commercial developments and road construction destroyed many of the Chickasaw village sites, the residue of which was usually only a foot or two below the surface. Cutting into the earth, bulldozers and other heavy machinery, including farm plows, exposed (and often further damaged) artifacts as well as human remains.

The collectors said that most of their artifacts were gathered in this manner or after soil erosion revealed some artifacts. From their research of historical documents, they knew that Chickasaws almost always lived on ridge tops overlooking streams or creek beds. So when a development was going in on or across a ridge top in Lee County or southeastern Pontotoc County, they knew that artifacts would turn up. During the seventies, each man more or less became a student of Chickasaw history; they studied documents and colonial records and matched these accounts with the types of artifacts in various locations. In 1980, they wrote and distributed a paper to numerous archaeologists and libraries about the locations of Chickasaw village sites across the 18th century.

When their paper failed to attract serious attention from archaeologists, the collectors stopped collecting actively and basically went their separate ways. But they continuously refused offers to sell their collections in hopes that one day their material would be exhibited in a Tupelo-based cultural center that would emphasize the historic Chickasaws. But city and county officials never adequately backed the idea.

Ironically, now that the Chickasaws have obtained the collections, the move to develop a Chickasaw cultural center in Tupelo seems to be gaining momentum. The mayor of Tupelo, Larry Otis, has conferred with Gov. Anoatubby, who is interested in discussing how the Chickasaws could be helpful. The National Park Service also has demonstrated its willingness to be part of a collaborative project.

Cook said he and the others also have volunteered to be part of a proposed collaborative project (with the Chickasaw Nation and city and county officials) to protect and preserve the significant number of Chickasaw village sites that have not been destroyed, but may be threatened by future development. The collectors know generally and in some cases specifically where the villages are located.

Gov. Anoatubby said the artifacts will be identified and analyzed by experts and grouped according to where they were found. "This should generate scholarly articles and even more research possibilities. We can't yet even imagine all the potentials. But we do know that this collection makes it possible for us to tell the Chickasaw story in greater detail than ever before."

Last Updated: 09/12/2014