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Cherokee Potters Revive Ancient Tradition

Ancestral Designs May Create New Market for Crafts in Tourist Area

By Dale Neal

CHEROKEE — It warms Joel Queen's heart when he sees the pots he's shaped by hand glowing bright orange or strawberry red in the open fire.

After the first firing, Queen will stuff the pot with corncobs and turn them into the flame for a smoky seal inside.

It's not a very efficient method. Queen, an experienced potter of 20 years, will lose three or four pots in the fierce heat for every one he pulls intact from the coals. The payoff is a thin-walled, waterproof pot stamped with geometric designs in a nearly lost technique that's 2,000 years old.

Queen, 35, an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians and a founding member of the **Cherokee Potters Guild**, has helped preserve his tribe's pottery tradition and cut a new path for profits from heritage tourism in Cherokee.

The smoky orange pots Queen and others pull from the fire can fetch hundreds of dollars compared to only a few dollars for the heavy black ceramics Cherokee crafters have fashioned for the past century for the tourist trade on the Qualla Boundary.

In turn, these crafters hope Cherokee could reshape its image as a Santa Fe-like destination for fashionable fine arts instead of cheap tourist trinkets made in Taiwan.

"Everything old is new again," observed Dan Keith Ray of The Institute at Biltmore.

"They are rediscovering a technology that's hundreds of

years old," said Ray, who formerly headed the American Craft Council in New York and had a key role in establishing HandMade in America, the Asheville-based arts and crafts advocacy group.



A Cherokee potter fires a pot.

"If they are able to perfect a whole new pottery that people haven't seen before, there will be serious collectors and production craft buyers who will be interested," Ray said.

Proud pottery tradition

Pottery has long contained the essence of Cherokee heritage. "We are the oldest tribe still producing our own work in our homeland," Queen said.

Archaeologists agree ceramics were born on the East coast of the United States about 4,500 years ago. Indians of the Southern Appalachians have the oldest tradition of pottery, stretching back nearly 3,000 years, even longer than the Pueblo potters of the Southwest United States, according to Barbara Duncan, education director of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian.

Long before Cherokee traded for cast-iron pots from

white settlers in the 1700s, they had cooked in waterproofed pots with rounded bottoms set in the coals. But later, with the introduction of cast-iron stoves, the round-bottom clay pots became impractical, Duncan said.

Over the years, fewer potters passed on the ancient technique of firing a pot into a waterproof vessel. In the 20th century, Cherokee potters began making “blackware,” a heavier black clay pottery borrowed from the Catawba Indians. The smaller, shiny pots appealed to the tourists visiting the new Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1930s.

Potters kept the traditional geometric designs that had once been slapped onto the clay with paddles, but instead potters began to incise these into the handmade bowls and vessels.

Queen, who has been shaping pottery since the age of 15, had heard stories by the fireplace growing up about handmade pots once used for cooking. He had seen the broken shards pulled out of plowed cornfields. He had tried his hand at firing the traditional pots, but they kept shattering.

Reclaiming the past

In 2002, a grant from the North Carolina Arts Council allowed the museum to bring in Tamara Beane, an expert in indigenous pottery, as well as archaeologists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Working with local potters, they wanted to replicate the stamped pots in the museum collection.

The Cherokee Potters Guild grew out of those workshops as 15 potters, including Queen and Bernadine George, finally pieced together the technique of firing the stamped pots.

“Now I see the old pieces in the museum and I say to myself, ‘Oh, I can do that!’” said George, president of the Potters Guild. “I love the challenge of sitting down and re-creating an old-style pot. I keep conquering the challenges, one step at a time.”

The ancient method of making thin-walled pots went against all the instincts of the potters after decades of making the heavier Catawba-influenced vessels, Queen said.

The potters have yet to discover how their forebears were able to build and waterproof large cauldrons that are mentioned in historical records. It might take days of heating the fire before a huge pot could be safely put into the coals. Queen and the others are eager to try.

Preserving the past of the pottery was the first step. Educating their market was the next step.

The Cherokee Preservation Foundation provided two grants totaling \$35,000 for potters to train others, establish a college-level course at Western Carolina University and to travel to major shows and festivals around the country.

Proceeds from the Harrah’s Cherokee Casino have provided the tribe with jobs for any enrolled member as well as funds to send young people to college. Money has also been set aside for the Cherokee Preservation Foundation to protect the tribal heritage and develop the local economy.

“This tribe is really on the cusp of something wonderful,” said Susan Jenkins, executive director of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, which has awarded 155 grants worth \$7 million since 2002.

Like many others, Jenkins sees crafts as another economic avenue beyond the gambling at the casino.

“Now is the time to look long-term,” Jenkins said. “I think people want to come here and have a Cherokee experience and stay for three or four days. We have the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, ‘Unto These Hills’ (outdoor drama) and the Oconaluftee Indian Village, but we need to find ways to roll that into one experience.”

Looking for the authentic

The success of authentic Cherokee crafts, along with other traditional arts across Western North Carolina, For the craft-conscious visitors looking for the authentic, they need look no further than the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, across the street from the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. Here at the nation’s oldest native American craft co-op, each item sold comes with a certificate from the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Vicki Ledford, Qualla’s general manager, can wander around the displays and point out the characteristics of the hand-woven baskets from river cane or white oak. She also recognizes the individual stamp of the crafter, from Amanda Crowe’s hand-carved bears to the late Lottie Stamper’s double-weave baskets to George’s pottery. “I just bought two of Joel’s stamped pots today,” Ledford said.

Sales are up 7 percent from last year as more visitors are searching out the authentic crafts.

“Authenticity is the key for heritage tourism to succeed in Cherokee as well as the rest of Western North Carolina,” Ray said. “People find out about the fake stuff, but the more sophisticated the consumer becomes, you can give them what is true. It’s no doubt that Cherokee will be one of the hubs in the Heritage Region.”