

Giving Back Their Voice: The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in the Twentieth Century An Oral History

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“When I was younger I was told you watch what you read, you don’t know who wrote it about you, you don’t know if they liked you, and you don’t know what their perspective of your people are.”¹ During an interview, on October 12, 2012 in the Tribal Historic Preservation Office in Cherokee, North Carolina, I had asked Yolanda Saunooke for her thoughts on the Eastern Band histories she read when she was younger. Saunooke’s interview along with two others, one with Tyler Howe and one with Russell Townsend, made up a collection of three interviews with officers of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. The Tribal Historic Preservation Office, funded through the Department of the Interior, seeks to consult with the community through research, consultation, and dialogue. In her youth, Saunooke was guarded towards Eastern Band histories and was selective in what she read. By contrast, she chose to learn the past through oral traditions. Her distrust of written histories stemmed from the fact that the historians who came to Cherokee did not utilize traditional oral histories as sources. Historians beginning in the late nineteenth century wrote histories and constructed interpretations without consultation, without community engagement, and thus without the Eastern Band itself. In this essay, I seek to give voice to the Eastern Band through elevating and recovering the oral tradition. This oral tradition demonstrates a counter narrative to the Eastern Band’s critique of professional historians.

The published history of the Eastern Band is no more than a thinly sourced patchwork of unsubstantiated information. In the past the few historians who did not rely on government records attempted to purchase sources from the Eastern Band. The Eastern Band were denied the opportunity to participate or contribute the lived experience of their history. These historians did not make use of knowledge passed down from generation to generation. The first half of this essay will critique these historian’s methods and arguments about the Eastern Band. In the second half, I argue that a collaborative approach allows historians to brush “history against the grain” through involving the Eastern Band in the process of making history.² The essay concludes by suggesting best practices in writing a history of the Eastern Band.

¹ Yolanda Saunooke, interview by Mattea Sanders, October 12, 2012, transcript, Representation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians Project.

²Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-258.

A recent emphasis in Native scholarship on ethnohistory is to create bottom up frameworks rooted in culture and discussions around decolonization.³ By emphasizing the Native voice within previously studied documents, ethnohistorians seek to correct the interpretations of the Native past. This methodology produces interpretations that emphasize American Indians as active agents in history. Recent studies in the history of Native peoples in the south, such as ones produced by Theda Purdue and Malinda Maynor Lowery, have shown that Southern historians must reevaluate the role of Native peoples in their past.⁴

Yet, in order to write a new history the deeds of the past must be confronted.⁵ The first histories of the Eastern Band appeared early in the twentieth century. James Mooney, an American ethnographer, produced works that concentrated on Southeastern Indians and Indians on the Great Plains. Mooney published two works on the Cherokee for the United States Bureau of American Ethnography, *Cherokee: The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* and *Myths of the Cherokee*. Mooney was part of a larger group of scholars at the Smithsonian Institution and the Field Museum of Natural History in the 1890s and 1910s. The federal government, motivated by “interest of investors and local politicians in allocating funds for a series of new surveys of the West” funded ethnographers to research natural resources.⁶ While these researchers found natural specimens, they also collected human related artifacts from Native cultures. Lawmakers quickly realized that research on Native peoples could be used for Indian policy. Out of these reports came the Bureau of Ethnography and a school of ethnographers trained not as historians, but as zoologists, archaeologists, and anthropologists.⁷

Mooney argued that Native cultures were dying out and no longer relevant in the face of expansion and industrialization within the United States in the early twentieth century.⁸ Mooney utilized anthropometry for which, “the disadvantaged and dispossessed were simply biologically and physically inferior.”⁹ Federal Indian policy at this time, abandoned the idea of assimilation, and accepted that Native people were scientifically different and would die off in time. Mooney reflects this theory in the introduction of his book *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*: “The East Cherokee of to-day is a dejected being; poorly fed, and worse clothed, and rarely tasting meat, cut off from the old free life, and with no incentive to a better, and constantly bowed down by sense of helpless

³ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).; Karen Kupperman, *Indians and the English: Facing Off in Early America* (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 2000).

⁴Theda Purdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁵Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257-258.

⁶Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 33.

⁷ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 42-47

⁸ Mooney’s writing is representative of the approach of ethnographers in the early twentieth century.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3. Edward Said wrote of this same phenomenon in discussing the Orient: “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”

⁹ Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 190.

degradation in the presence of his conqueror.”¹⁰ Mooney clearly believes that the white man has conquered the Eastern Band and they are now in a state of decline. He even goes on to note that reports indicate “a slow but steady decrease during the last five years.”¹¹ Mooney argues that the traditional medicinal formulas of the Cherokee are of no value to them anymore: “In a few years the new conditions would render such knowledge valueless with the younger generation, and that even if he retained the papers he would need some one else to explain them to him [the Cherokee].”¹² Mooney did not believe that the formulas were relevant to Cherokee society any longer. As a result, his mission was to collect what he believed would soon be ancient history.

Mooney’s method in writing *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* was to collect six hundred sacred formulas from the Cherokee. He argued that the ethnographic importance of the materials was that they constituted the “genuine production of the Indian mind, setting forth in the clearest light the state of aboriginal religion.”¹³ The formulas not only included medicinal recipes but also sacred rituals performed by shamans. He obtained the formulas by purchasing them from a variety of sources. In writing about his practice of purchasing the formulas he wrote, “It is sometimes possible to obtain a formula by the payment of a coat, a quantity of cloth, or a sum of money.”¹⁴ However, not all Eastern Band members approved of this method of exchange. Mooney writes openly that he communicated with a young Eastern Band woman, whom he believed “had some knowledge of the subject,” and “volunteered to write the words which she used in her prescriptions.”¹⁵ But Mooney elaborates that he never received the prescriptions because of “the opposition of the half-breed shamans.”¹⁶ It is evident through this statement that the shamans who prepared these formulas were hostile towards Mooney and did not approve of his methods. This form of trade disconnected the objects from the Eastern Band, and thus disconnected the Eastern Band from history. Mooney’s interactions with the Eastern Band sparked immediate distrust of professional historians.

Mooney also strived to portray the Cherokee as backward and uncivilized. For example, consider his discussion of Cherokee medicine. Mooney concludes, “Like most primitive people the Cherokees believe that disease and death are not natural, but are due to the evil influence of animal spirits, ghosts, or witches.”¹⁷ He treats Native America as a collective group with embryonic traits that are characteristic of all Native groups. These traits are complex rituals and religious beliefs that Mooney argues are “evil.” Mooney’s inability to see beyond his Eurocentrism and bias creates a history that illustrates early twentieth century ethnographic practices and federal exploitation of Native Americans.

The three Eastern Band members I interviewed discussed James Mooney and the place of his work in Eastern Band society. Saunooke confirmed the flaws of Mooney’s

¹⁰James Mooney, *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 333.

¹¹Ibid., 333.

¹²Ibid., 313.

¹³Ibid., 319.

¹⁴Ibid., 310.

¹⁵ Ibid., 305.

¹⁶ Ibid., 322.

¹⁷ Ibid., 321.

work: “The only reason I touched Mooney’s book is that I recognized the legends. I didn’t read nothing else other than the legends because I took those, as it was okay.”¹⁸ The medicinal formulas that Mooney collected through purchase were recognizable to Saunooke, otherwise the Cherokee history that Mooney constructed was incomprehensible. Mooney’s history lacked context or a historical interpretation of the Cherokee in the early twentieth century. Saunooke could recognize the formulas long after Mooney was gone because they continued to be passed down through oral transmission. His work remained with the Cherokee, and today they only utilize the original sources in his work. This piecemeal selective adoption of Mooney’s work is indicative of the cultural resistance the Eastern Band formed against professional historians.

More recently, historians John R. Finger and Sarah Hill have written stronger histories of the Eastern Band.¹⁹ Warren Susman once wrote, “No effective cultural history could be undertaken until historians learned how to deal with the cultural forms characteristic of their times.”²⁰ Just as Mooney’s work was a result of the cultural forms of his time, Finger and Hill were able to move towards a wider and fairer analysis of the Eastern Band because of the new cultural history and the reflective history of identity politics. As Malinda Lowery writes in her work on identity politics with Lumbee Indians in North Carolina, historians began to argue against the thoroughly entrenched racial and identity theories of the past.²¹ However, as much as Hill and Finger acknowledge and discredit the racial ideologies of the past, they remain wedded to a narrative rooted in the institutional history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Finger attempts in *Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of the Cherokees in the Twentieth Century* (1991) to correct the past and write a history that weaves “the disparate threads of Eastern Cherokee experience into a comprehensive tribal history from 1900 to the present.”²² Finger emphasizes that his approach is to look through the lens of “political, legal, and economic developments as well as major social and cultural changes.”²³ However, Finger also stresses federal Indian policy and the place of the Eastern Band within it. He relies heavily on official government documentation especially Bureau of Indian Affairs records. Finger concludes that the Eastern Band’s

¹⁸ Yolanda Saunooke, October 12, 2012.

¹⁹ John R. Finger, *Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (1997). The interviews also discussed Mary U. Chiltosky and her works: *Cherokee Cooklore: Preparing Cherokee Foods, Make My Bread, Cherokee Words with Pictures, Cherokee Plants and their Uses: A 400 Year History*, and *Cherokee Fair and Festival: A History Thru 1978*. Chiltosky conducted oral histories with the Eastern Band and wrote mainly about Cherokee daily life. Saunooke spoke about her experience with Chiltosky: “And one other books was Mary Chiltosky, which she was married to Goingback and she did some small legends and so I read that.” Saunooke indicated that because Chiltosky was married to an Eastern Band member, she had a more intimate relationship with the tribe and wrote decent histories because of this gateway into the tribe’s history. Chiltosky was not a trained historian but was able to make headway towards a more positive history than the trained historians prior to her writings.

²⁰ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 101.

²¹ Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*.

²² Finger, *Cherokee Americans*, xi.

²³ *Ibid.*, xii.

history is wrought with complications over identity and defining the term “Cherokee.” He argues that tribal members have endured through this identity crisis.

Sarah H. Hill’s book, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (1997) demonstrates the influence of the cultural turn in the study of the Eastern Band. Hill’s gender and cultural history examines the history of Eastern Band women through focusing on how their basketry changed over time. She draws on written sources, interviews, and the baskets themselves to argue that Cherokee women were active agents of change. They reacted to identity crisis, assault on their culture, and environmental encroachment by adapting old customs into new traditions. Through the practice of basket weaving, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is a crucial pathway to understanding the fate of Eastern Band history. Thus, for both historians an unmistakable declension and victimhood narrative is both prominent and unavoidable. This narrative of is an inevitable byproduct of writing the history of a people through the history of a state institution and not the people themselves. James C. Scott writes that as he examined how states attempted to settle nomadic peoples, he “came to see them as a state’s attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.”²⁴ Hill and Finger depict the Eastern Band as victims of this state trying to make their society legible. Thus the state is attempting to socially dominate the Cherokee through their goal of legibility.

The problem of this perspective was readily apparent in the interviews conducted with the Tribal Historic Preservation officers. While Tyler Howe conceded that Hill and Finger’s work was better than that of James Mooney, describing it as “a great start,” he asserted that “it’s still a history that represents a reactive history. It’s these Qualla Cherokee, these North Carolina Cherokees reacting to whatever the white Thomas Terrill, BIA whatever, told them to do. And they reacted to it.”²⁵ The history that has been written only perceives the Eastern Band through the lens of the Federal Government, thus continuing a narrative of victimhood that robs the Eastern Band of their agency. While Hill argues that Cherokee women could have agency and thwart the cultural and environmental attacks, she still places them within the context of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the outside world. Finger portrays the Eastern Band as reacting to the state, always subjected to the forces of change around them. Despite heightened sensitivity to identity, Eastern Band history remained obscured in the works of Hill and Finger.

From the early twentieth century to the present, historians have constructed Eastern Band history without reference to the oral traditions of the Eastern Band. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”²⁶ The Eastern Band historians of the past held the power,

²⁴James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998), 2.

²⁵ Tyler Howe, interview by Mattea Sanders, October 11, 2012, transcript, Representation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians Project.

²⁶Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

and the fruit of their power was the histories that sustained embedded views on identity and victimhood at the hands of the state. The result is a historical record that operates on the axes of mythology and reaction. These are the histories of continued federal Indian policy that dictate the Eastern Band's existence. To a great degree, the history of the Eastern Band itself remains to be written. As the remainder of this essay argues, this history can only be written through utilizing the voice of the Eastern Band.

The interviewer did not use typical oral history methods of preparing an interview guide prior to the interview. During the interview, the questioner only asked opening questions and discussed topics that might be considered. These topics included the National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Smithsonian Institution. As a result, the interviewees led the interview. This approach minimized the opportunity for bias, especially as an outsider to the community. The oral histories were also the first source consulted in beginning the research process for this project. Instead of flipping through records of the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or the National Park Service, the first source consulted was the Eastern Band. This method allowed for recovery of the Eastern Band's orally transmitted history and makes possible the construction of a new history of the Eastern Band. Three examples demonstrate the potential for uncovering a counter-narrative of Eastern Band history built on oral traditions.

One of the first subjects discussed in the oral history interviews was the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools on the boundary of the Eastern Band. According to John Finger's scholarship, from the Cherokee removal in 1838 to the recognition of the Eastern Band in 1868, Eastern Band children did not receive any education. When federal tribal recognition occurred in 1868, a Bureau of Indian Affairs agent was assigned to the tribe and he attempted to build BIA schools. But, as a result of factionalism within the tribe and the tribe's unwillingness to heed to the BIA's relentless demands, the schools were closed. In the 1880s, the Quakers came to the boundary and set up boarding schools.²⁷ The lived experience of the boarding schools was much more complex than this black and white analysis. According to Russell Townsend, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, the boarding schools taught children that the Eastern Band could not assimilate into white society. They were told to "be blue collar unskilled workers who would just stay home and not really participate in white society."²⁸ The boarding schools continued late nineteenth century federal Indian policy by institutionalizing the theory of assimilation into an education system. This assimilation included the eradication of Native culture and language. In the boarding schools, Eastern Band children did not learn the history of their tribe. Townsend spoke about the experience of Eastern Band students: "You had outright punishment under the boarding schools for being and thinking Cherokee and maintaining your culture as a child."²⁹ Not only was the culture not taught to the children, they were punished for speaking the language or attempting to retain any part of their Eastern Band culture.

²⁷John R. Finger, *The Eastern Band of the Cherokees: 1819-1900* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 131-138.

²⁸ Russell Townsend, interview by Mattea Sanders, October 12, 2012, transcript, Representation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians Project.

²⁹ Russell Townsend, October 12, 2012.

The removal of Cherokee history and culture from Cherokee education resonated for generations. Townsend reflected on cross-generational ramifications of the boarding schools: “You have generations of Cherokees who were not taught to achieve. They weren’t taught to seek their own history. Before the Indian Civil Rights movement they definitely had every reason to tell their children don’t act Indian because it’s not worth it. And your history and culture are dying and you don’t need it. It’s not going to do you any good.”³⁰ This testimonial confirms that the boarding schools taught children to be afraid of their own culture, to not ask questions about it, and that their best interests were to detach themselves from the tribe. However, the personal history of the boarding schools was not the same for everyone. Saunooke discussed how one elder told her about a great experience she had with the boarding schools:

She was raised with her mom and dad. Her mom was a fluent speaker but wouldn’t speak Cherokee to her, she spoke English to her. She explained what they [her family and her] did to get shoes for the winter, what they did to get coats for the winter. So when the boarding school came, their mom and dad sent them and she looked at it as a blessing in disguise. While she was away, it was hard for them [her parents] to support their selves but it was easier because they knew their kids were being taken care of, they had a roof over their head, they had heating, they had clothes, they had food.³¹

This story is a memory of the boarding schools that presents an alternative perspective. The history of the boarding schools and the Eastern Band is complex and demonstrates a variety of perspectives that need to be told. These can only be told through tapping into the oral traditions of the Eastern Band.

Another subject discussed in the interviews was the tourist industry on the boundary fueled by the National Park Service presence. For Yolanda Saunooke, the tourist industry supported her family. The main thoroughfare of the Eastern Band includes numerous shops selling a variety of items such as tomahawks, baskets, and a variety of other goods enlightened by typical American Indian stereotypes. Coming out of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, visitors stop at the shops, walk around, and view the many “chiefs” dressed in stereotypical dress, sitting under teepees. Previous historians have argued about the exploitation of the Cherokee for money, however Saunooke discussed how the tourist industry kept many families, hers included, afloat.³² Her family owned a tourist shop, and she spent much of her childhood working in the shop. She describes her experience:

When my mom was little, my grandma would sit outside in the downtown area just kind of like on the hill before they redid it. As the tourists came she said they stood outside and said, “Had me a penny, had me a penny”

³⁰Russell Townsend, October 12, 2012.

³¹Yolanda Saunooke, October 12, 2012.

³²The most thorough study of the Eastern Band and tourism is Christina Taylor Beard-Moose, *Public Indians, Private Cherokees: Tourism and Tradition on Tribal Ground* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009).

and they [the tourists] threw pennies in the hat for them and they always knew in the summer time they ate very well. In the wintertime, it was rough, they starved but they managed in the summer time because of the tourists. It helped them survive easier. I think my uncle would tie my mom on his back to go to town and [they] come back and have fifty dollars and say let's go to the store and get what we need. That was the good take that my family had on it because they knew that without the tourists it would be hard.³³

For Saunooke the tourist industry allowed her family to make it through the winter. The tourist industry brought visitors to the boundary to spend money and to economically interact with the Cherokee. The history of the tourist industry for the Eastern Band was not about exploitation. Instead, the tourist industry economically supported the community.

The last example was the relationship between the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Eastern Band from the establishment of the park onwards. The interviews revealed that when the federal government established the National Park, the lives of the Eastern Band dramatically changed. Before the park existed the line between the boundary and the outside world was not apparent. Anglo-American Appalachians and the Eastern Band traded culture, food, and skills. Many of the communities in and around the boundary included both Cherokee and Anglo-American Appalachians. Russell Townsend considered what changed when the National Park opened,

Prior to the park, the Eastern Band was a thriving community that was very clean and neat and orderly. There was a lot of trade interaction; every community around here had something invested in the Eastern Band. They had to come get their corn ground here and come get their horses shod here, they had to interact with Cherokee people on a regular basis. Prior to the federalization of lands in the early nineteenth hundreds, there weren't really lines drawn, people didn't say that's a white community and this is a Cherokee community, they just said these are the people who live in this part of the mountains and we are all working together to make a living.³⁴

According to Townsend, Anglo-American Appalachians not only interacted with the Cherokees they relied on them for necessities such as food and livestock.³⁵ Townsend also discusses the lived experience of the Cherokee. He discusses the orderliness and cleanliness of the boundary prior to the National Park. The Cherokee economically flourished through extensive trade networks. However, the "federalization of lands," brought dramatic changes. The lived experience of the Eastern Band shows that the federal presence in the region dramatically changed the cultural, social, and economic situation in the region.

³³ Yolanda Saunooke, October 12, 2012.

³⁴ Russell Townsend, October 12, 2012.

³⁵ While discussing a different time, Kathleen DuVal re-evaluates Anglo-American and Native American relationships. Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006).

As stated earlier, the interviews of three Tribal Historic Preservation Officers in Cherokee (Yolanda Saunooke, Russell Townsend, and Tyler Howe) took place without a scripted list of questions. Consultation, dialogue, and collaboration with the Native community were central to the oral history project that produced this essay. Through collaboration, the story of the Eastern Band can be told for the first time from the lips of those who may have experienced it, lived it, or heard it for generations. Best practices in writing an Eastern Band history need to concentrate on collaboration and open dialogue. Through this activity, the community is discussing and learning about their history. At the same time, this practice is reflective because the community then tells their story. This methodology also goes beyond previous Eastern Band histories. Instead of only showing how they reacted to all outside intrusion, this history demonstrates how they adapted and sustained life in the face of intrusion. The Tribal Historic Preservation Officers were allowed to tell their own story in their own form. The story flowed easily, the orally transmitted history of the Eastern Band in the twentieth century.