

AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

Archaeologists, collectors, and Native Americans have often been at odds with each other. But recently a huge collection of artifacts was returned to the Chickasaw Nation as a result of the three parties working together.

By Elizabeth Lunday

Photographs by Kristen Dorsey, Chickasaw Cultural Center, the Chickasaw Nation

The artifacts were spread out for view on a dozen or more tables. Hoe blades, crusted orange with rust, were piled alongside gun barrels. Silver bracelets glinted. One box contained stirrups; another, lead shot. Beads were everywhere: blue beads, red beads, black beads, tiny beads the color of bone, and large beads thicker than a man's thumb.

The guests at the home outside of Tupelo, Mississippi, moved silently between the tables, picking up and turning over items. Three men—Julian Riley, Steve Cook, and Buddy Palmer—watched. They had collected these objects more than 25 years earlier, rescuing them from destruction by bulldozers and backhoes. Archaeologists and representatives of the Chickasaw Nation, who considered the three men to be looters, examined the objects.

These disparate parties—archaeologists, collectors, and Native Americans—had come together because Cook, Palmer, and Riley offered to donate their collection to the Chickasaw Nation, and the tribe wanted the archaeologists to study the materials.

A sample of beads from the collection.

That December day in 2003, remembered by Riley, tribal historian Richard Green, and archaeologist Brad Lieb of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State University, was the culmination of years of effort.

Today the Cook-Palmer-Riley collection is housed in Ada, in south-central Oklahoma, the headquarters of the Chickasaw Nation, awaiting its final move to the Chickasaw Cultural Center under construction in nearby Sulphur. It's known that Lee County, in northeast Mississippi, had been home to the Chickasaws since at least 1682, when French explorer La Salle met them at what is now Memphis, Tennessee, on his canoe trip down the Mississippi. It was the second encounter between the tribe and Europeans; in 1541, the chronicles of Hernando de Soto record how the "Chicacas," enraged by the explorer's demand of 200 men for porters, attacked and routed his army. Though it's uncertain where this battle took place,

it's clear that by the late 1600s, the majority of the tribe lived in compact villages centered around today's Tupelo. In the 1830s the Chickasaw were forced by the U.S. government to leave their home in Mississippi and move to Indian Territory in Oklahoma.

"I'VE BEEN INTERESTED IN INDIAN ARTIFACTS since I was five years old," says Riley, whose vocations include auditor, Civil War historian, and watercolor artist. "My aunt came in from the cotton field, and she had an arrowhead she showed me. It was like a light bulb coming on in my head."

In 1965 Riley found a glass trade bead in the woods. About the same time, Buddy Palmer moved with his family into a new subdivision in Tupelo. Palmer, who ran a family-owned supermarket, remembers walking along newly bulldozed roads and finding beads scattered across the ground. He and Riley, friends from the Army Reserves,



Archaeologists John W. O'Hear of Mississippi State University's Cobb Institute and Timothy Baugh of the Chickasaw Cultural Center examine a late 18th-century copper kettle from the Buddy Palmer collection.



**A small reconstructed
Chickasaw pottery vessel.**

**Most Chickasaw pottery was
tempered with crushed fragments of fossil oyster shells.**

started spending weekends and evenings looking for artifacts; a few years later they met Cook, a civil engineer.

They were horrified by the destruction of Chickasaw sites by projects like the construction of State Highway 78. They contacted the archaeological community and state and local authorities to try to stop the devastation, but no one could—or would—help. The majority of sites were on private property, where they had limited legal protection.

Archaeologist John O'Hear, who is also with the Cobb Institute, describes that time in the 1970s as a "mess." University archaeologists were spread thin working on federally funded projects and didn't have the time or funding to attend to Chickasaw sites, nor did they have the authority to stop private development. In the case of Highway 78, O'Hear believes cultural resources were destroyed because in some

cases the Chickasaw village sites were not easily identified by surface evidence, and there was pressure from authorities to move the highway project along. Nevertheless, says O'Hear, the archaeological community bears some responsibility for not finding a way to preserve Chickasaw sites. "There is blame to go all the way around, from the university archaeologists to various state and federal agencies," he says. "During the '70s, people just dropped the ball."

"We did everything we could to save these sites," says Palmer, "but there didn't appear to be any interest, so I proceeded to preserve what I could." Cook, Palmer, and Riley developed a sophisticated understanding of their finds. Having identified village sites, they thought it would be easy to name the villages by referencing historical maps and records such as James Adair's 1775 *History of the American Indians*. "Then we started to run into problems," says Riley. "One map would show a village at one place, another map at another place." They concluded that was because village names moved with village inhabitants.

Early in the 18th century, the French and English struggled to establish supremacy around the Mississippi River by establishing alliances with local tribes. The Chickasaw allied with the British while the French partnered with traditional Chickasaw enemies such as the Choctaw. Between 1720 and 1740, as conflict with their enemies intensified, the tribe consolidated into defensible positions. The conflict continued over several decades. At the conclusion of the French and Indian War of 1754 to 1763, the French relinquished their claim to the area, and the Chickasaw gradually returned to previously abandoned villages. Cook, Palmer, and Riley thought they could trace the movement of these populations over time by consulting the historical and archaeological records.



The front and back of a shell gorget. These gorgets have been found in contexts dating from about A.D. 1700 to the 1830s.

The three men made another effort to interest archaeologists, this time contacting Ian W. Brown and Jeffrey P. Brain at Harvard. Brown and Brain were at that time excavating Natchez sites in the Mississippi Valley, and the collectors hoped to interest them in a collaborative project studying the artifacts and excavating the remaining sites. Despite some initial interest, the project didn't occur.

The collectors were bitter and angry. "Some of the academics gave me the impression they'd rather see the artifacts destroyed than found by an amateur," Palmer says. Without their work, says Cook, precious materials would have been lost forever. "But how are you going to preserve the stuff," he says, "if subdivisions are going to be built on top of it?"

By 1981 they stopped collecting. They co-authored a paper about Chickasaw village locations and gave a copy to the Lee County Library. The artifacts were squirreled away in attics, under beds, and in safe-deposit boxes. That, it seemed, was the end of that.

MORE THAN 20 YEARS LATER in the sticky heat of a Tupelo summer, Richard Green took refuge in the air-conditioned Lee County Library. It was 2002, and Green was researching a book. His trip to Tupelo had so far been a dead end. "I thought, man, I'm wasting my time—but it was a hot day and I wanted to get out of the sun," Green

says. He soon stumbled on the paper by Cook, Palmer, and Riley. One name stood out. "I knew the name Julian Riley, because he had been identified to me as a collector," says Green. He called Riley, and the conversation, to put it mildly, did not go well. "He wanted nothing to do with me or the tribe or any archaeologists," Green says. "I wasn't very nice to him," Riley admits.

Green persisted and eventually Riley agreed to get together. He came to trust Green, who obtained a written statement from Governor Bill Anoatubby promising not to prosecute the collectors. (Although the collection of Indian artifacts was never prosecuted in the 1960s and '70s and legal codes were confused and self-contradictory, particularly regarding private property, Mississippi state law could have been read to prohibit the collectors' actions. By the early 1980s, the antiquities law had been amended and clarified to ban disturbance of Native American graves or remains on private as well as public property.) Not long after, Green attempted to meet Cook. His first call to Cook resembled his first to Riley, but again Green's patience paid off and the two began to meet. Green felt like he was making progress—but nothing prepared him for what came next.

"We're sitting out on his porch one night, and Cook says, 'What do you think about the Chickasaws; would they want to own all three collections?'" Green says. He was



Portions of a Natchez Indian bowl from the Steve Cook collection. In 1731, after their defeat by French forces, many surviving Natchez took up residence among the Chickasaw.



The golden patina on this English spirits bottle resulted from its long contact with the alkaline soils found at some Chickasaw sites.



An iron pipe tomahawk from the Buddy Palmer collection. Only two pipe tomahawks have been recovered from Chickasaw sites.



This silver tube, which may have been used as a hair ornament, was fashioned from a wristband from the Julian Riley collection. At least half of the silver items in the collections are finished European items that the Chickasaw refashioned for their own purposes.

floored. Cook picked up the phone and consulted with Riley and Palmer. By the end of the evening, an offer was on the table. Cook's telling gives more credit to Green. "The real person who made this happen was Richard Green," he says. "He persuaded me from a historical standpoint that I owed what I knew to the Chickasaw and the public in general."

The next step was the meeting on December 18, 2003. Along with Green, numerous representatives of the Chickasaw Nation attended, including Governor Anotubby, Lieutenant Governor Jefferson Keel, and Heritage Preservation Administrator Kirk Perry. A final agreement was signed not long after. The collectors agreed to donate the artifacts, while the tribe agreed to pay for the time Cook, Palmer, and Riley spent working with the tribe and archaeologists.



A silver wristband from the Julian Riley collection.

O'HEAR HAD KNOWN ABOUT the Cook, Palmer, and Riley collections since the 1970s, but archaeological ethics prohibited him from studying them. It was an impossible situation, O'Hear says. Even if they had the resources, museums or universities couldn't buy the collection because that would be seen as adding value to items that had been looted. While O'Hear acknowledges the caveats of the case, including the lack of response from archaeologists in the 1970s, his hands were tied. When he got the news of the donation he was stunned.

The donation gives archaeologists the opportunity to make up for their past omissions, according to archaeologist Brad Lieb. "The professional community missed their chance 25 years ago to do what the Chickasaw Nation is making possible for us to do now," he says.

O'Hear was also glad the tribe would be using archaeologists to study and preserve the artifacts. In many cases, tribes receiving materials returned under the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990 have reburied human remains and cultural artifacts or otherwise removed them from professional scrutiny, according to David Hurst Thomas' book *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity*. Archaeologists are often viewed as little better than grave robbers themselves, a conviction that is the legacy of the troubled history between Native Americans and those who study them, Thomas writes.

The Chickasaw Nation is an exception, generally welcoming archaeologists into their midst. The tribe's rationale is that these people can help tribal members understand their heritage and pass it down to future generations. "To be able to educate our own people, we're learning more from archaeologists," says Perry. The Chickasaw hired the Cobb Institute to conduct a provenience study to learn where and how the artifacts were found. The study, based on field notes, photographs, and the collectors' memories, identified 319 features including middens, houses, forts, and palisades in which artifacts were found.

However, the majority of the features are burials, says Lieb. Chickasaw custom was to bury family members under the dirt floors of houses, surrounded by items that were either prized possessions or gifts from relatives. This brings up a sensitive issue for the Chickasaw Nation. Their tribal code prohibits the display of funerary items, considering them part of the burial, and tribal members are concerned that these goods be treated with respect. The Chickasaw

Nation will allow scholars and interested Chickasaw to study burial goods, but no destructive testing will be permitted.

"Everything we do with regard to the study or repatriation of artifacts is motivated by respect and reverence for our ancestors, our heritage, and our culture. We are working to balance a genuine desire to preserve knowledge of the past for future generations with our heartfelt duty to treat these objects in a way which shows the proper respect for our ancestors and the beliefs of our people," says Anoatubby.

The most common items in the collection are trade beads. Cook has spent years studying beads and developing a chronology tying the dates different beads were manufactured and traded with the historical and archaeological record of village sites, extending the work of the 1980 paper into three papers available online at www.thechickasawvillages.com. Other decorative items include round ornaments worn on necklaces known as gorgets, bracelets, and ear pins. The collection also contains kettles, bottles, pots, hoes, and axes.

Some items point directly to historical moments. A pair of armbands with an eagle motif was commissioned by George Washington to give to Indian leaders. A French grenade survives from a French-led attack on the village Ogoula Tchetoka in March 1736. While the majority of the artifacts are European trade goods, some earlier items survive, including hand-axes, shell gorgets, carved pipes, and projectile points. Lieb says the collection will shed light on the Chickasaws' cultural chronology, settlement patterns, and trade with other Native American groups. Once the provenience report is complete, the next step will be to prioritize materials for conservation and study. Conservation won't begin until the artifacts are moved to the new Chickasaw Cultural Center, due to open in the summer of 2007.

Contact with the Tupelo collectors has had another unexpected result: the preservation of a Chickasaw village site. The Beasley family, neighbors of Steve Cook, sold their 35-acre farm, known as Cedarscape, to The Archaeological Conservancy in the summer of 2005. The Conservancy purchased the site with a grant from the Chickasaw Nation, and then leased the land to the Chickasaw. The Beasleys knew the farm contained the Chickasaw village

when they bought it in 1963. They often spotted potsherds and glass beads scattered on the ground and sometimes found human bones. The Beasleys refrained from digging for artifacts for fear of disturbing graves.

The Nation intends to develop an interpretive center that will be open to the public. Classes in Chickasaw culture, arts, and language will be offered. "Think of that, the Chickasaw language spoken by our people on that ridge top once again," said Governor Anoatubby to the *Chickasaw Times*.

HOW DID THREE MUTUALLY SUSPICIOUS groups overcome their biases to work together? One factor is economics. According to the Chickasaw Nation, in 1987, the tribe had 250 employees and an \$11 million budget, mostly from federal government programs; in 2006, the tribe's budget reached nearly \$350 million, with income coming from enterprises ranging from casinos to a chocolate factory. The money has given the tribe the opportunity to explore and preserve its heritage.

Another factor, according to the collectors and archaeologists, is the patience and persistence of Richard Green. Green takes little credit, but he "was instrumental," says Lieb. "Green would be the principal catalyst," Cook says.

The most important factor was the willingness of the Chickasaw Nation to work with collectors and archaeologists. "I can't laud Governor Anoatubby and the Chickasaw enough for taking this progressive step," says Lieb. Cook, Palmer, and Riley agree. "They bit the bullet," Palmer says. The Chickasaw put the past behind them in their decision to "get the collectors and the archaeologists together and come to a meeting ground. It took a lot of guts on their part."

Anoatubby told the tribal newspaper the *Chickasaw Times* that he felt obligated to obtain the artifacts for the tribe. "By acquiring the collection, the material is now consolidated under our control," the governor says. "We intend to learn all we can from these materials about how our ancestors lived and adapted to the changing circumstances in tribal life."

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These pieces of a segmented head band were made from arm and wristbands. The piece second from left bears the British sterling mark.