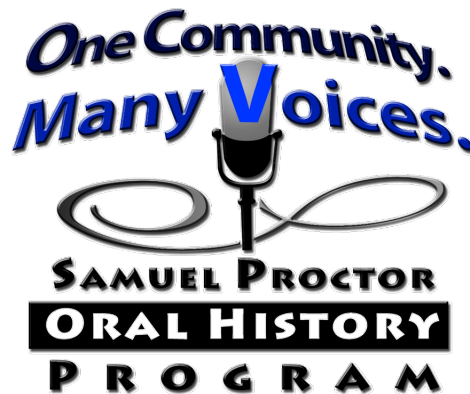


Delaura Henry

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-028**

Interview by:

**Patricia Martin and Linda Willis
January 31, 1974**



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MISS CHOC 028 Delaura Henry
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Abstract: Delaura Henry describes her experiences going to college at Mississippi State University, comparing it to her time at Clark Memorial, a junior college. She describes her struggles academically, and how she was not prepared for the rigor of MSU. She then discusses her current work at the Arts and Crafts Association, where she sells traditional crafts made by community members. She discusses the artists who make the crafts they sell, including basket-makers and dress-makers, and how they price items. Finally, she discusses a role she had in the movie *The Trial of Billy Jack*, her knowledge of Choctaw dancing, and her aspirations to return to college.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi; Education; Art]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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P R O G R A M
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MISS CHOC 028

Interviewee: Delaura Henry

Interviewers: Patricia Martin and Linda Willis

Date of Interview: January 31, 1974

M: Thursday, January 31, 1974. This afternoon we are interviewing Delaura Henry.

Interviewers are Patricia Martin and Linda Willis. Delaura, could you tell us a brief summary of your high school life and your experience at MSU?

H: When I was going to high school, class of the year I graduated in [19]69, a class of forty-five. It was okay. It didn't motivate me enough to compete, or there wasn't that much competition or things like that going on, like the things you have now. There's a whole lot more of activities, there's a whole lot more of Indianist things that you do now in the high school that we didn't have, and it didn't quite prepare me enough to be able to compete in college until I went to a junior college first after graduating. I went to Clark Memorial, which is in Newton, Mississippi. I went there for about a full year. Then, during the summer, I switched over to Mississippi State, which is in Starkville. The size is really quite drastically different from Clark Memorial, a junior college to a university. One of the things was the junior college was very small, and it was like it only had, like, about four hundred or five hundred students, and by the time you got to know all the students, there wasn't much of anything else to do. I took up music courses, mostly, at the junior college. Then when I started going to Mississippi State, things were a lot tougher, besides academically and getting along with the students. There was so many doors open at State that you had to discipline yourself very much, which I had a hard time learning to, because I didn't have that much, like, studying hours, or I had not learned to discipline myself to be able to set times where to study, and then when to have fun and then when not

to. But I learned as I went along. My relation with the other students at first, I ... like at the time that I was going, I was the only American Indian student going there, and there was hardly any other Tribes or other natives except for those that were from India or Colombia or China. That part made me feel that I was opening a door for other students that, you know, may want to or could go to a university right in this state if they wanted to—

[Break in recording]

The students that I got along with, some were really friendly, and some were nice. Yet there was a tension of prejudice there, and I could feel it. Like in the classrooms, or I could feel it even when I walked into the grill, or even around the grounds of State. But, like anywhere else I suppose, you'll find that, and all you have to do is just to adjust to it, and then try to get along with the other people as much as you can. Academically, I was having a lot more problems, whereas, like the other students—like, okay, compared with my roommate or the other girls that around in the same dorm, I had to study a lot more hours than they did, which I didn't think was very fair. But I had to put more time at times to studying for a test or an exam, and then get all worked up, and then thinking that I was doing good, and then I wasn't when the test came out. And all this made me realize that, like, during high school, I never had to do a term paper before until I was my freshman year at the junior college, and then when I had to do it again over at State, it was a whole new frustration that I had to go through, but I think I came out okay. It wasn't fantastic, but I think I did okay. I stayed at State for a couple semesters, then I ran out of money, and then got tired of studying all the

time, too, and then I also began to feel like the things I was studying or the things that I was going to school for didn't—I couldn't seem to grasp what it was going to do, what it was going to help me when I went back. Say, if I was going to come back and work here, and—

[Break in recording]

M: Delaura, were you scared to go to the university?

H: Well, I was apprehensive a little bit, but, compared to the high school I graduated from, I had no concept really what to expect out of college. And I got a little for it beforehand at a junior college. So, the junior college I went to kind of prepared me a little bit, like I said. You know, that's what I first did my term paper, but I had a lot of help with it. The English teacher there helped me a lot, and how to do this, and how to do that, and all the research stuff. And of course, too, the junior college there was almost similar to the high school that I went to, because there were a lot more lenient teachers, and besides that, there wasn't that many students competing for me to get motivated enough. And the switch to a university as Mississippi State, which isn't—it's pretty big, but it's not all that huge. But it's big enough for me where I got scared, because there wasn't, like—so you had an advisor you could go to, the advisor had so many students that they couldn't comprehend, or they couldn't understand the things that I was going through. I really wonder now if any Anglo teacher knows the turmoil or frustration an Indian child goes through in order—like, even to make small simple decisions. And I was a bit scared, but you find out that in the Anglo world you have to compete, and as long as you're believe in yourself, go ahead and do it.

M: How did you get into this arts and crafts deal? Were you interested in selling these Indian crafts, or did you just applied for a job and you got it?

H: Well, basically there's about two things that I think went my way. 'Cause a couple of summers I started working over at the other crafts shop, the Arts and Crafts Association. Now, the Arts and Crafts Association is different from this crafts shop, the Arts and Craft Enterprise. Well, in words, they're a lot different, only this Arts and Crafts Enterprise handles more of the training of the Choctaw students. Setting up workshop for people that are interested in learning besides selling the finished product that we get and trying to make a go of it. So, by working in the summers at the other craft shop, it began to dawn on me how limited that shop was, and how many advantages it had if people that were really interested in it ran it. So, when they had this program started—they were working on this program, the craft shop now or the craft program now—the first thing I did was I just applied, you know, applied for a job when this was open. But I got contacted first by a certain person saying that this job was open, and then they had three or four other qualified people that had worked in a craft shop or that had interest in the arts and crafts of the Tribe. But all of them had permanent positions, and so I was contacted of this job, and I applied for it. And then with the interest I had, and kind of the small experience I had, too, I think helped me got this job.

M: Who makes the baskets that goes in your shop?

H: Most of the baskets that I've got here like this. Okay, there's about six ladies in the different communities that make them. Actually, out of the whole Tribe, there's only about six, seven ladies that still make these baskets. The two of the

most experts that I know of are **Isby** Gibson from Conehatta, and **Susan Densen** from Sebastopol.

M: What are some of the materials they use for the baskets?

H: Well, there are two different types of materials that they use in making baskets. Like, the swamp cane to make the basket with, and then the dyes—either the natural dyes, or the commercial dyes. But most of the women have gone into the commercial dyes, because it's much easier, and then the plant dye, the natural dye that they use are scarce and extinct and hard to find. And then also there's one or two people that still use the white oak to make baskets, too, and also from the honeysuckle vines.

M: What is the purpose of this arts and crafts that you're running?

H: Well, our main hope, our main goal or reasons for running the program is that we would like to preserve, I hope, our customs or our cultures that our ancestors have left for us, and we'd like—especially I'd like for you people, yourself and me and then all the younger people that we've got, to develop pride and appreciate, you know, the things that their ancestors have done, and the skills that their ancestors have that has been handed down. And to train younger students or younger Choctaw people, because, like I said, even in the basket making skill there's only six ladies that I know of that still make 'em. And during the survey that we did with the high school, there wasn't that much interest, nor I don't think any of the high school girls know of this skill. And so this culture, this arts and crafts and the heritage of our people, is dying out, and unless the students get either interested or motivated, or have pride in themselves, or get an interest in

themselves to start learning this—because if they don't, then when these ladies that are elderly, you know, pass away, and then what is going to be left of what you call yourself as a Choctaw?

M: When y'all have a workshop like basket making, and these older ladies come down here to train these other people, does so many women come down here to participate in it, or not?

H: Our first workshop that we had in the month of September, that we had, like, okay, three teachers, besides **Isby** Gibson, Beatrice Johnson, **Susan Densen**, they're all from Conehatta Community, or area. And each of these ladies had three specialties, or each distinct type of baskets work that they did. Whereas **Susan Densen** made double-woven baskets, **Isby** Gibson made waste baskets, or wall baskets and purses, and Beatrice made picnic baskets and egg baskets. Now, all these ladies all make different types of baskets, and so, with the ladies that we had, the people that turned out weren't as many as they wanted them to. The workshop that we had were mainly to attract the high school student, and from the high school students doing their home economics class, they'd come and watch and observe, or then try a little part of it if they could, only they didn't have enough hours, or they couldn't sit there all day like the hours that we had, so that they could really get the full advantage of it. And when the women from the other programs, or women that were just interested, did come, and we got several people started and learning of the skill. And now most of the workshop that we are aiming or having is for the benefit of the high school students, or for

the younger Choctaw people, so that at least they have this chance of learning if they want. Then if they don't, then at least we gave them the chance.

M: Where and how do you get your weaving baskets?

H: [Whispers] Blankets.

M: Blankets? [Laughter]

H: Okay, most of the weaving is done in Red Water with the weaving enterprise, and that's sort of like—okay, there's about two ladies left now that make the blankets besides Judge Ben and Phoebe York. And they're the two ladies that still make them, and that's—Phoebe does her work at Red Water Community, where that weaving enterprise center is, and Judge Ben usually does hers at her home. And I think Judge Ben is starting a workshop or trying to train some people over at Tucker. We're also trying to train—while Phoebe York is over at Red Water—train some of the younger people there too. Only we have problems of the looms that doesn't have enough of the equipment that goes with it.

M: Who supplies those rabbit sticks and stickball sticks and blowguns?

H: In the spring, when we first started this program, we had the training classes where one of our aides from Conehatta taught the kids that came to class at the trailers the makings of the ball sticks and rabbit sticks, and there's several people in Conehatta and a couple in Bogue Chitto that still make the ball sticks and the rabbit sticks. I don't know if you yourself know enough of the kind of the history behind it. It's like the rabbit stick used to be used to hunt when they were hunting rabbit before the Anglos came with the steel weapons, or the iron weapons that they have now. And for an expert to throw the rabbits, you have to do it—like,

they'd wait all night or all day behind a bush or a tree, and then when a rabbit came along, then they'd throw it in a certain way where the big, larger head part happened to hit the rabbit, and then that's where you get your rabbit. And, like, the blowguns that we have are also supplied by several of the craftsmen in the different communities that we have. They're made from the swamp cane, and the inside is drilled out. There's usually two different kinds used to use: The smaller kind was used at night for short distances, and the larger one, the six to eight feet long, was used in the daytime for longer distances. The darts they have in there are sometimes made from two different kinds of material. One is from the cotton, and then the other is from the cattail. These weapons that we used to have, sometimes used as weapons for defense purposes, are not used kind of anymore except maybe for very few older people still do. At times like during the fair when they use to have these contests, you know, of—I don't know if you remember or not, but a long time ago they used to use it for contests, like when they had a stuffed-up rabbit that goes back and forth, and they use to hit it with it, or else the blowguns ... For some reason, they weren't used last year at the fair, but they're just used for competitive sports purposes rather than what they were originally used for. And you know that the stickballs are still played during the fair or each year.

M: Do you display your baskets during the fair, or any other stuff that you take there? Are you putting them on display, or are you selling them too?

H: We had demonstration, like people come to see people actually doing the work, so we have a demonstrator of one or either type making baskets. And we also display, and we try to sell, too. But most of the stuff is made to sell.

M: Have you ever tried making a Choctaw dress and a shirt, or not?

H: I've tried making a Choctaw dress with the help of my mother, and it seemed like it took forever. [Laughter] Like, for a completed, say, a full-length Choctaw dress would take three weeks to a month, depending on the person that's making it. And a Choctaw shirt would take about a week and a half to two weeks, and also depending on the size, too. And, like, the designs that are used, some are more complicated, and some take more time. So, the average amount of making a Choctaw dress is between three weeks to four weeks.

M: Who makes the Choctaw shirt and dress and brings them in?

H: Well, we have several people that are making the dresses and the shirts. One of the main people that does a unique work is **Willie B. Willis**. There are several people that make it in the different communities, so I can't name them off hand.

M: Do they price these dresses during the time—how long it takes them, and all? I mean, the prices they put on, is it determined by how long it takes them to fix the dress?

H: Well, yes and no. Like, okay, some of the people, I give them materials, you know. I provide the materials for them, so, all we have to worry about is the work that we're into it, but there's some of the people that come around selling, they get their own materials. They have their right to set the price on them, and the price kind of varies. But we have the prices that we follow. You know, the

different size of shirt and the amount of work that it does take is the guides that we go along with the prices to be sold. And then after buying them, then the shop has the right to price it at, you know, any price it wants to sell.

[Break in recording]

M: Tell us about your experience about having a part in a movie.

H: Well, it was hectic. [Laughter] That's the only word I could think of. It was fun in meeting the people and everything, but, I suppose, like in almost in anything that you do, you have to be competitive and really want to do it to stay in. It was an experience that I'm glad I had, at least I kind of know what it's like. Whereas, like, in the morning you're on call, say somewhere about seven o'clock in the morning, and you never know when the session or when the film taking is going to be over, or the scenes that they're shooting at are going to be over. Sometimes they'll get through at one o'clock in the afternoon, or they'll get through at 11:30 at night or two o'clock in the morning. All depends on if the scenes that we're taking is good, if they're satisfied with it, or if nothing goes wrong or the weather. Like, I was only supposed to stay one full day on a Saturday, and the horrible thing about it was I didn't know what I was gonna do, or what all was gonna go on. I didn't get the script in time, so that Friday night when I got in, they handed me the script and said, "Learn this, go." The script was so thick, so you go and read it through and learn such-and-such lines. And so, I read it through that night, and then met some of the people that were in it, and talked it over, and what all was going on. It wasn't at all like I suppose you think, you know, filmmaking. It was mostly just really hard work. And depending also on the producer or the director, too. Like, if

you didn't do some certain thing right, you'd get yelled at, or you get fired, you know. So, it was a hectic experience.

M: What was the name of the movie you were in, and where was it filmed at?

H: I'm sure you've heard. You know, the first movie that he came out with was called *Billy Jack*. Now, this is a sequel to it, it's called *The Trial of Billy Jack*, and the scenes that I kind of had a small part in was filmed over at Tucson. Some of the scenes were shot at the university, and then some were out at the canyon where at night when we were really doing that fighting scene, the riot scene, it really got cold, freezingly cold. I don't know when it's gonna come out.

M: Can you dance any Choctaw dances?

H: Yes. [Laughter] Oh, I remember when I was about seven, eight, nine—between seven and twelve years old, or thirteen years old, in each summer during the fair when they had the, you know, dancers from the road show. Well, I use to be the very last one in the line to dance out there. I don't know how I remember that.

M: Do you house dance?

H: No. Let's see, there's only been about I guess twice that I've been to. I mean, I've seen enough to know, and I've danced, you know, the type of dance they have, and I think I know it, but to me it looks too much like a square dance.

M: How did you feel when you're in the princess contest?

H: Scared, shaking. [Laughter] My knees were knocking, and I couldn't keep smiling, 'cause my lips would be twitching all the time. You had to smack or wet your lips so it wouldn't go dry. But it was fun.

M: Were you confident of yourself?

H: [Laughter] No. Definitely not.

M: What are your plans as of now? Are you going to study to be working here, or maybe go back to college, or not?

H: Well, so far, hopefully, I'm applying for Dartmouth College, and I'm hoping to go back to school in September so that I can get at least a full degree behind my back, and more knowledge and experience, so I can come back. If this program is still going on, and if it's still in existence, I'd like to be able to come back and work with it again.

M: Thank you.

[End of interview]

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