Cherokee museum artifacts are 'incredible'

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina Director and Curator Luther Lyle holds up what looks like the remnants of a weathered boulder.

"This is a Native American bowl made from soapstone," he said. "This was what the Cherokee used before they used clay. It is thousands of years old."

He walks over to a glass case and pulls out what appears to be an old pine knot.

On one end, an intricately detailed face is carved into the wood, and it resembles that of a Native American man.

"This was found near Westminster where the original Toxaway Town village was. It's owner just found it on a bank one day," Lyle said.

Most of the artifacts that line the walls of the Museum of the Cherokee, located in Walhalla, are pieces of history uncovered from the earth out of many locals' backyards.

"A lot of our collection comes from a lifetime of collecting pottery, arrowheads and jewelry," he said. "It's getting harder and harder to find these kinds of things as we move away from plowing the land like we used to when we farmed."

Also, a lot of the Keowee River valley where villages were located, is now covered by Lake Keowee. Jocassee and Hartwell waters also cover village sites.

"One man told me he used to go to a particular river bank in the valley and pile the bed of his truck with dirt. He'd take it home and sift through the dirt and find thousands of glass beads the Cherokee traded for," Lyle said. "It's incredible."

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>
> **Luther Lyle**
> Director and curator, Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina

The Museum of the Cherokee, which opened in May, is now the only Native American museum in South Carolina.

"I don't think people realize the importance of the Cherokee and of Native American people of this area," Lyle said. "Francis Nicholson was a royal governor of South Carolina in the 1700s. When he went back to England, he took a memento from the state. The only thing he wanted to bring back was a Cherokee basket. It's now on display at a British museum."

He said the first pottery made in North America was made along the banks of the Savannah River, even though it's believed the first Native Americans traveled over the Bering Straight Land Bridge near Alaska.

Lyle said the first month of business at the museum has been favorable, and many faces have wandered in to the Short Street museum wanting to see the artifacts, which also include stone tomahawks, game pieces, peace pipes and other utensils.

Lyle's favorite item is an exact replica of a deer brain-tanned buck skin (Yes, deer brain was used as a tanning component).

"The saying used to be that 'A deer has just enough brain to tan its own hide,'" Lyle laughed.

After several years of working on the building's exterior and interior, Lyle is pleased that everything seems to be falling into place and onto the shelves.

"We've got everything finished and built in the museum – right now, we really need volunteers," Lyle said.

Interested volunteers must be qualified and share an interest in Native American history, he said. Currently, the museum is only open from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Saturdays, and volunteers work a two-hour shift – from 10 a.m. until noon or from noon until 2 p.m.

"You don't have to volunteer every Saturday, either. You can volunteer once a month if that's what you like," he said.

Volunteers can contact Lyle at lutherlyle@bellsouth.net or stop by the museum, 70 Short St., Walhalla, from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. Saturdays.

He said artifacts are still being accepted, although the museum only takes what fits its interpretation of the Cherokee.

For information, visit www.cherokeemuseumsc.org.

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Luther Lyle holds a metal ax that the Cherokee would have used in South Carolina. The Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina in Walhalla also has stone tomahawk artifacts.