Trail trees

the pre-GPS solution

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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WALHALLA — No maps. No atlas. No GPS-navigation system.

It didn't matter, not back in the 1600s and 1700s anyway. Today, it may be cause for panic.

The Cherokee Indians crafted their own way of locating landmarks and villages while trekking from place to place.

Many settled in lands that are now Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee, but a main thoroughfare ran from Charleston to the Mississippi River.

On a path similar to what present-day residents would call Interstate 85, this main path didn't have double yellow lines and wasn't sprinkled with sneaky police cars trying to catch speeders.

Instead, these paths were marked with special indicators dubbed, "Indian Trail Trees."

Luther Lyle, local resident and Cherokee enthusiast, has been enthralled with the history that encapsulates Oconee.

"For a long time, no one even knew what Oconee meant," he said. "I spoke with some Cherokee elders, and they told me it stood for, 'land beside the water.' Then, I met some people locally who shared the same interest in learning about Cherokee history. The sad thing was, historic documentation of them in South Carolina was almost non-existent, or not very accurate."

Currently, Lyle and other enthusiasts are spending the majority of their time locating still-standing trail trees in the area while working with the Oconee Heritage Center in Walhalla, which is housing many Cherokee artifacts.

There have been 25 trail trees confirmed in Keowee Key alone, as it's located just 12 miles from what was once known as Keowee Town, the largest of the lower-elevation villages.

"They were very crafty about marking trail trees," Lyle added. "Young white oak saplings would be bent and shaped in right angles, pointing usually in the direction of the next town. Think of bonsai trees and how they are shaped to grow in specific ways. It's the same thing, just on a bigger scale. Pretty amazing stuff."

These trees were usually placed about 25-50 feet apart, he added.

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There are thousands of trail trees in the Southeast, with more than 50 located and confirmed in Oconee County.

"It's just so great to have so many here," he said. "Because there has been plenty of clear cutting all across the area, we feel very lucky."

In addition, some were used to mark the trail directions between Indian gathering places. They often followed the mountain ridges so the Indians could see long distances to look for landmarks and to avoid climbing over the mountains. Others marked sources of water, graves sites, treasure locations, places to hide or get out of the weather. Some were used as message trees where an Indian could pick up information to be transmitted between Indian gathering places, he added.

Lyle is looking for the help of the community to locate as many trail trees as possible.

"With the community's help to locate these trees, we can complete a full map and learn more about their settlements and traditions," he added.

For more information, call Lyle at (864) 638-6070.

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Maps of the Cherokee travel routes are avaliable at the Oconee Heritage Center. Their 'trail trees' have been compared to I-85 current day. These trees were shaped and bent to clearly mark trails from Charleston all the way to the Mississippi River.



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Luther Lyle, local historian and Cherokee culture enthusiast, looks over maps that list where the Cherokee traveled and settled.



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This arrowhead used by the Cherokee Indians in Oconee County was found and now resides at the Oconee Heritage Center.