

**Information gathered by Judy Allen April 20,2021**

**Story appears in Memory Keepers book**

## **Chester Cowen**

### **Master bead artist and culture historian**

Chester Cowen, renowned beader and photographer, literally weaves history into every bead work project. "Everything tells a story," Chester says. "Each line of bead work has a story. My trademark is two rattlesnakes coming head to head. Dad was Chickasaw and Mom was Choctaw. On my ball caps, the bead work on the rim is two rattlesnakes going head to head to represent the protector of the stomp grounds of both cultures. On stomp dance grounds, when we aren't present, the rattlesnakes protect the dance grounds.

"The bead work represents my parent's marriage. The two snakes coming together - the two tribes have the same protector."

Chester's first completed article of bead work dates back to the Boy Scouts in the summer of 1957. "I was preparing for the World Jamboree. The Black Beaver Council was out of Chickasha at the time. We were asked to come up with an Indian Dance Group. George McVey, a Comanche elder, taught us a number of short dances and helped us with the dress. He also gave me my first training in beading," said Chester. "I found it interesting. George directed us to take mementos from Oklahoma to hand out. We took medallions. He is the one who taught me the 'lane stitch', which is not used frequently by Choctaws. This stitch tells a story that goes in one direction, just like a lane on a road. The old beading pieces are constructed to tell a story. They are usually telling a story about the person who is wearing them."

Chester is currently working on a new story through bead work. "I am collecting blue wool so I can make a 19th century baldric," he said. "I need to collect enough navy strips of material - like from military garments. That is what our ancestors did. They got military uniforms (from European soldiers). Before that they wore garments with feathers on the outside surface. They did use beads for decorations, but not the extremely large beaded collars you see today."

Choctaw beads in the past were principally made from natural materials such as porcupine quills, shells or fruit, according to Chester. "The quills would last a long time, but not centuries," said Chester. "It is difficult to find them on anything that predates 1750."

Chester said, "On a historical perspective, we know our ancestors used shell and hard berries for beads, although they were not long-term beads. Juniper and cedar would have had fragrance that permeated for a long time and they would have had value because of the smell." Sharing his knowledge on bead work is important to Chester, and he has conducted numerous classes.

Chester retired in 2010 from his career as the Still Photography Archivist for the Oklahoma Historical Society, which is a branch of the Oklahoma State Government. When Chester first took the job, he was based in the Wiley Post Building, which now houses the Oklahoma Supreme Court. The Archives are now based in the Oklahoma History Center, just down the street on Lincoln Boulevard on the northeast side of the State Capitol.

Although retired, Chester uses the Oklahoma History Center archives for research on two books he is writing. "I am hoping the Friends of the Archives will be able to use these books to generate funds," said Chester. "The Friends of the Archives need funds to purchase supplies, purchase collections, hire part time staff, and they also need a budget for emergency situations."

One of the books is *A Biographical Index to Oklahoma Territorial Photographers*. "I have a list of about 1,680 photographers from the spring of 1842 – November 1907, and 9% of them have been confirmed to be women. This list has been gleaned through newspapers, private collections and societies," said Chester

"The other book is *Dating Family Photographs from 1859-1900, Year to Year*. There are a lot of pre-1900 photographs in the United States. You find printed paper photos in Europe a few years before that, but prints made it to the United States in 1859.

"I have a personal collection of a minimum of 50 photos for each year from 1861-1900. Some years far exceed that. Of dated images from the United States there are 782 studios in the United States who either job printed, rubber stamped, or embossed as a way of dating photos. That is an incredibly firm way of dating. That is supplemented by hand dating, which is secondary. I sometimes call into question hand-dating, because of elements in the photo," said Chester.

“In many cases, one finds that many examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century photography are copy prints or later prints from an original negative. In the book, I will explain and will teach how to tell if it is a copy.

“This book will be very useful to Indian families who are using photographs to work out genealogy. If you can get an accurate date on the picture, it helps work on the census collection data. This helps if you need to ascribe the photo to someone else.

“About six years ago at the Association of Tribal Libraries and Museums Conference (ATALM) Conference, I knew we were lean on tintypes. And I started working on how to date tintypes. At that time, I had examples of about 64 different styles of mounts. I now have about 250 United States and 60 European mounts and can give pretty good dates when they were produced. When they are still in the original paper masks it helps us give a date. In 1869, developing changed, giving way to a brown tone. This was only dominant during the ‘70s, returning to a preference for black and white tone in the ‘80s.” said Chester.

“I first became interested in photography when I got my first Brownie camera before my first Boy Scout Jamboree in 1953. I was 13 years old. It got me started and when 1957 rolled around and we went to the World Jamboree, I stayed to tour Europe following the Jamboree. I bought a German-made Retina. Its lens was ten-times better than the United States-made lens. I came home and was able to begin doing some quality shooting.”

Chester studied anthropology and was able to travel through a fellowship during the summer of 1958 to Guatemala in association with a museum there to check out the archaeology program.

It became obvious to Chester if he continued his studies in Central America, he would be entering a saturated field. He decided to follow another path. Chester enlisted in the Army. While at the Army Language School he discovered an opportunity for a posting in Asmara, Eritrea.

This led to Chester staying the almost three years in the Army in the 4th Field Station in Asmara. While there, he met the love of his life, Linda Lemon, who was the daughter of the Post Engineer on the base. They married in July of 1968.

When Chester returned to the United States, he found a job in Chicago so he would have access to the Field Museum Library. He said he spent a lot of time going back and forth to Michigan to date Linda until they married. They eventually moved to Oklahoma, where Chester attended OU, receiving a BA in Anthropology, a BFA in Fine Arts, Art History, and a MA in Art History. He also enrolled in Indiana University to further his education.

Chester credits his studies in Indiana under Professor Roy Sieber with a lot of his inspiration. “I was taught to look at diverse art. My library at home is largely an Africana library and specializes in African art. As a result, I look more broadly at what is art. That realization helped me understand bead work at a depth I don’t think I could have gotten just through American Indian studies. Sometimes you have to study more than just your own cultural groups. If you look at more than just your own viewpoint, it helps you see things from a different view,” said Chester

“If you can’t learn how to respect other people, how can you expect them to respect you?”

Chester is a charter member and serves on the Board of Directors of the Choctaw Code Talker Association. He helped write the bylaws of the organization in 1998, and also is a leader in the area of fundraising and research for the Code Talkers Association.

Friends of Chester know him for his wit and frequent use of puns. “One of my standing jokes is, “When it comes to the crafts, it’s the beaders who really count!” quips Chester.

He said he loves archery. He has been involved in archery since 1953 and still competes. “I have been known to even go to Kiowa country and beat those Kiowas,” he laughs. And another pun can’t be resisted. “For a retiree, when practicing archery, that is the only way us old guys have any pull!”

Chester, always a proponent for staying healthy, wants to stay in shape. He is also a tremendous proponent for tribal culture, so he found a way to combine fitness, culture and social distancing.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Chester found archery a good sport to keep in shape. “I can practice archery and keep my distance from others.”

During the initial phases of the pandemic, his wife, Linda, was very busy sewing face masks for the police department, the Veterans Administration hospital and Norman Hospital support staff. As Linda finished a large stack of masks during the first months of the pandemic, she received a call asking if she could do a batch of another 25 masks for detectives at the police department. She took some material over to a neighbor and they got busy immediately. "I belong to a quilting group, so I have material at home, and this is something I can do to help," Linda said.

Chester's advice to young people is, "Find what you like to do and find a way to help others. Find a profession that includes these things and you get to enjoy what you do! Doing what I did in museum work was very satisfying to me."

"That is one of the most important lessons I have learned in life – find what you enjoy and use it to benefit people!"

Chester recently discovered his family genealogy on the Spanish side has a relevant interface to his Choctaw lineage. "My father's mother's great-grandfather, Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, was the Governor General of Louisiana from 1797 to 1799, when he died of the yellow fever," said Chester. Prior to that appointment, he had been sent from Spain to Spanish West Florida to become the first Governor of Natchez.

"In 1793 he negotiated major treaties with the Choctaws and was in a pipe ceremony with the Choctaws." Chester had read about these events in a book written by Greg O'Brien, [Choctaws in a Revolutionary Age](#). The 1793 Treaty of Nogales established alliances with several tribes, including the Choctaws. "I was glad to read of the pipe ceremony, and read where he was referred to as a supporter of the Choctaws, and called 'a beloved man'," said Chester.

He continued to research his genealogy, finding numerous books that mentioned Gayoso and Choctaw Treaties that Gayoso helped negotiate.

"The night before the Treaty of Natchez, Gayoso put together strings of white beads, symbolizing peace. These were gifted to the Principal Chiefs of Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek tribes on behalf of the Spanish, at the signing of the Treaty," said Chester.

"I have always been a peacemaker – I just didn't know where it was coming from," said Chester.

Cut lines:

*Chester's interest in archery has led to a diverse collection of bows and arrows. During the pandemic, he found archery a good sport to keep in shape, combining fitness, culture and social distancing.*

Photo by Judy Allen

*Chester wearing one of his beaded caps at a Choctaw Veterans event.*

Photo by Judy Allen.

Military info:

Branch of Military Army

Year Enlisted 1962 – Year Discharged 1964 Military Rank SP4

