



Backcountry Shopping: Cherokee Trade in the Backcountry



Rich Territory

Cherokee Indians, Ani Yun Wiya (The Principle People), were one of the predominate groups of Native American peoples residing in the southeastern United States. The Cherokee inhabited a vast territory in much of the present day states of Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. These territorial lands were divided in to overhill, valley, middle, outer, and lower regions which each encompassed multiple Cherokee towns. At one point these backcountry Indian lands housed approximately 300 traders.

Prosperous Trade

Trade between Cherokees and settlers was gradual. However, once it was embedded in to Cherokee society, trade became a necessity. Out of necessity for a continuous supply of goods, Cherokees began to stray from their traditional hunting culture. The Cherokee ventured from subsistence hunting to hunting purely for the profits of backcountry trade. Their reliance on the English for barter of important goods, like guns and farm implements, pushed them farther and farther away from traditional Cherokee lifestyle and hunting ethic.

Sign of the Times

Deviating from the traditional Cherokee hunting lifestyle, Cherokee hunters began to kill more game than they needed. Instead of killing only as many animals as they needed to survive and using all parts of the slain animal in functional ways, the Cherokee killed animals simply for their hides and would leave the rotting carcasses behind. The hides of beaver, deer, and buffalo were commercially harvested and traded in backcountry trading posts, with as many as 75,000 deerskins traded in one year. Trade also introduced the Cherokee to ready-made cloth for clothing, leading to the transition from traditional wear to more European attire.

Backcountry “Thrifting”

How many times have you looked at an old piece of furniture, hoping to find some way of repurposing it only to soon realize that giving it away for someone else to make use of it is the best option? With backcountry trade, this was sometimes the case, sans traditional furniture, of course. However, many of the goods traded were not used for the object’s original purpose. For instance, a traded brass pot would not have been used for cooking but rather melted down and turned in to beads, necklaces, gorgets, and clothing and war ornamentation.

Buy it for a Buck

“Greenbacks,” “singles,” “smackers,” “bucks,” and “skins” are all modern nicknames for the U.S. dollar. Interestingly enough, some believe that the last two common names, “bucks” and “skins,” can thank colonial trade for the title in reference to money. Because the colonial trade of buckskins was so prevalent, items were commonly traded for a “buck,” and, as some say, the name stuck. For instance, a Cherokee hunter could trade 30 buckskins for a gun. These days, the words “doe” or “dough” can be heard in reference to money in general. This nickname, too, just might have come from the deerskin trade in reference to female deer hides.

Trading Frenzy

The Articles of Agreement allowed for British settlers to dominate trade with Cherokees. Traders and trappers who flooded the interior of Cherokee country observed an unregulated policy of trade transactions. By 1721, the Carolina Provincial Government mandated backcountry trade. The primary trader in Ninety Six, Robert Gouedy, commanded trade in the Cherokee town of Great Tellico. Gouedy’s influence among Cherokees inspired loyalty in trade that followed him to the establishment of his Ninety Six trading post along the Cherokee Path. Gouedy used both his location and influence to gain the majority of Cherokee trade passing through the Ninety Six area. However, Ninety Six would soon face mounting tensions between Cherokee and settler, as the unregulated trade policy grew out of control and traders cheated more and more Cherokees out of what they were truly owed.