

Mountain Heritage Days

Interviewee: Bernadine George

Interviewer: Philip Coyle

Date: September 24, 2005

Duration: 27:43

Philip Coyle: Can you tell me your name and spell your name for me?

Bernadine George: My name is Bernadine George. That's B-e-r-n-a-d-i-n-e- G-e-o-r-g-e and I'm from Cherokee. Born and raised there. Have two children, two girls, three grandchildren. Work with pottery.

C: Let's talk about the pottery.

G: I guess I might have been doing it about 20 years. A lot of it say in the last ten. I've done a lot. I work a lot with the schools and demonstrations for different groups and travel a little bit, not much. I want to say that I was one of the first ones, there's a group of us, we got a little pottery guild together. We work a lot with the museum and we revised the old-time stamp pottery that was the Indian tradition. Old time traditional pottery. And actually, what it was useful utensils like cooking vessels and back in the late 1800s this particular style, the paddle stamp, it kind of went out. Most of that was due to metal pots and coming on to the reservation where we live and it was not a trade so you see that. It kind of went out. And then a lot of the pottery that you see today is sort of, I would call it ornamental. It's not really a useful. It's not something that you would cook in, or eat out of. But we like to think that we revised the old-time stamp pottery and I like to do it.

C: Tell me about making a pot.

G: Like what do you want to know?

C: How do you do it?

G: If you want to make just a small pot, you can just pinch it but if you make a big, like a big cooking vessel, you'd want to make coils on it. You use your paddle, your paddle has usually a flat side and a design side and the flat side thins the walls of your pot. Then you flip it over and you put your paddle and it puts a pattern to it. And traditionally that's just the way it's been that's just the way it's always been as far as I know. And the Cherokee pottery goes back thousands and thousands of years. It was a way there's still some places that we thought we'd like to visit and go and see. I know there was a place in South America and Mexico that still there's some of the tribes there that still do pottery exactly as was you know right now. They do it just like it was.

C: So are you going to take a trip down there or did you ever...?

G: No, we have thought about it but we never did. Everybody's kind of busy. I'm retired now. I've got I ain't going to just pack up and go by myself, you know. We were going as a group. Most of the ones that work with us hold down full time jobs and it's not convenient. I work

C: Sounds like you had a job, sounds like you were working.

G: I worked.

C: What was your career?

G: Well it wasn't a very, very nice career. I was a custodian at the high school. I worked up there for, now that was...most of my life I was a homemaker so I didn't, I worked but mine was mostly seasonal jobs. Just to help. It wasn't a... I wasn't the sole supporter of my home. I was just a helper.

C: Heaven forbid you should be a homemaker.

G: Yeah, no I enjoyed that, raising my children. But anyways I was a custodian and teacher at the high school at Cherokee for about 15 years and as things worked out I got to retire and now I just kind of do what I want to do. And a lot of what I have to do. I still got a lot of things I have to do.

C: Your family is still...

G: Yeah

C: Well maybe you could talk about your family a little bit.

G: Not a whole lot. Got three grandchildren that I enjoy. Two daughters, they're grown. They're out of the way and got their own, they do their own thing.

C: The ones that came before you. You were talking about your grandmother?

G: That would have been my grandmother. She was born and raised in the area. My grandmother. Her name was Anona Long. She come out of the Crows, she married a Long.

C: Famous name, Long.

G: Yeah. My grandpa's name was Peter Long, Pete Long. But Bigwitch I don't know if you've heard of that or not but Bigwitch and Long are the same in Indian. Some go by Bigwitch and some go by Long and actually it's the same. I don't know how, but it is.

C: Bigwitch is interesting to me because there's that Big Witch Gap there on the Parkway.

G: Yeah, you have to know... it ties in to the similar to the same cause my grandpa, well my mother was raised on Big Witch. It's a small branch off of... in the Wolftown community. There's a Wrights Creek and a Big Witch. It's just like two forks and that's where my mother was raised.

C: [inaudible] I guess I was over in Cherokee a couple of times this summer and just sitting with my son on the Oconaluftee Visitor Center.

G: That's nice isn't it.

C: Well I'm just, is it me or is Cherokee becoming a really nice place to be. Seems like every year Cherokee is becoming and nicer and nicer place to be. Is that how you see it?

G: I feel safe there. There's no... only time I don't like being out and around about with my grandchildren is during the big Harleys when the Rally's, the big Rally's. All the noise and everything. Other than that, I've always thought it was a nice safe place.

C: So how did you get involved with the Mountain Heritage Days.

G: To tell you the truth I don't know. I've been doing this though for several years. I just got invited is all I know. And it might have been through the potter's guild. It might have been there. I don't know how people get ahold of my name. I really don't.

C: Are you in the Cherokee artist's directory?

G: No I'm not. I'm supposed to because that comes from the Museum. I'm supposed to be this year but no I'm not. Like I said I do a lot of demonstrations and workshops but you know like that. This summer now I worked about the whole month of July with the Asheville schools. Like the, what do you call them, summer camps and things or youth programs and last year I worked right at home with a... like the month of April we worked with all of the second graders. They done really good. Little kids, most of the time, they do real good. The little kids do and they don't expect a whole lot, they just do it and it works.

C: Well I have a little five-year-old son, he's running around here and I love little kids because they love to do art. Like they love to do projects. You don't have to convince them or anything, they just enjoy it.

G: Yes, Uh-huh. I worked a lot too with the high school, the high school kids. I even worked with the staff I guess so they can do their own way of teaching it. We work with both staffs at the schools over there. And it's always interesting. Maybe out of, if it's 20 or 30 kids, I'd say most of the time you see some really excellent work come out of like... well if you get 5 you don't have to stand right over them and help. They can just do it. It's good and I'd like to invite you to it's at the end of the school year. It's usually in... it advertised at the high school they have an art show. You need to ever come see that. It's really nice. You would not believe what the kids can do. There's a,

I don't know where Reba Elders is from but she's the art teacher, the one that teaches them painting and drawing. And she'll say "I love it, just teaching here." She says "you don't even have to teach the kids. They can teach you a thing or two." Lot of them can, like just little ones. Some you wouldn't even think. Some of the little meanie's. [laugh] I get tickled, always got a kick out of the kids.

C: Well that's funny too because I think some of the people are just not particularly interested in book type learning, you know but they're interested in other things.

G: That's goes probably about anywhere. My little granddaughter, I couldn't believe, she painted a picture, the picture she painted. I couldn't believe it. She didn't give it to me though, she give it to her other grandma.

C: Hurts! You let her know about it, feel guilty about it. Now she's going to have to draw you a picture. What first drew you to the pottery as opposed to some other kind of art, like weaving or something else.

G: I think all that when you do stuff like this... I hope this ain't said nowhere or heard nowhere, I've always been a person. I don't never just conquer one thing, it's all my homemaking. I sewed all my kids' clothes. I canned most of our food. I put it up. I learned how to do all that and when this hit me here I just wanted to do it. I don't like bead work, I don't like baskets and stuff like that, but I like this. Really, I'm doing what I like.

C: I love how you put that because I can relate to that where you say that it hit you, pottery just kind of hit you and then it just kind of...

G: Yeah.

C: I was talking with the fiddle maker over here and then I have been trying to play the fiddle and it hit me that way. Where I started in and then wait a minute this feels right to me. Is that how it was for you with this.

G: Yes. I love it, I love to do pottery. I like to work with kids.

C: Now what about the clay. Where have you been getting the clay.

G: Well there's been a study as you know-. If you're familiar with Western here there is, you know Barbara Duncan? Well she's one that helps us and helps take care of everything with the potter's guild. Anyway there's a group of people from here going to school that are actually working with our clay source. They're working but you see you can't just go where you want to and dig where you want to. It's got to be a good understanding with the people who own the land. It ain't like it used to be like where there was a source and you just helped yourself to it. But they're checking it out to make sure and we're supposed to... they're trying and I'm hoping that soon we can have a

good clay source from right here. We got some that we worked with from the Ferguson territory, out on, do you know where the Shoal Creek area is over Whittier way where the Ferguson fields? All the big Ferguson... they're like pastures. Now there was a clay source that come out of there and I've got some of it. Made some pretty pots out of it. But there was a lot of cleaning up to do on it. And that was some of the reddest, red dirt. I use a lot of dirt to do some of the... sometimes if I want to put a figure on one of my pots and polish it in, it will cause it to be a deeper in color and they call it like negative paint and it's all in with the different colors of clays. And anything, I never get tired of this cause I do not like to just set and do little pots it's like you just got to keep on and stepping on into just some more territory. And there's lots of territories that you know you just keep going on.

C: Sounds like, this lady right next to you she was talking about how creative, like there is a creative spirit that's involved. A lot of time people think about old time crafts or something that they are repeating what's been done in the past. The way you're talking about it, sounds like you are trying to break new ground in a way.

G: Oh for now, for me it's all new. But it's already been done. A lot of this on this old time this stuff, why I'd never dreamed even how to make a big pot. All I could make was little pots and when I got to learn to make a big pot, man that's alright. And it's so easy. There's nothing hard about it.

C: That's a beautiful pot.

G: And I can make that pot just as big and tall as I want it.

C: And with the thin walls like that?

G: Oh yes all the way even. You'll find it even.

C: O.K. I'm going to ask you a funny question here which is sometimes when I'm playing the fiddle and it's like an old song it's almost like I feel like I'm learning something from the people that passed on before me even though I've never met them. If you know what I mean. Do you ever get that, do you ever have like that feeling of being in contact with some of those potters and like you're somehow learning what they learned or something?

G: No, but I've got a cousin that does woodwork, he does woodcarving. And he says that he can set there and he said that he can see he just can sit there and see himself a doing this piece of woodwork that he wants. He can see it before it's even finished. Like before he does it, he knows what he wants. It's just like what you almost put in mind of what you want to do. And I thought God, I don't want to be like that. No, I'm just joking. But seriously he told me that.

C: There's this pot 200 years ago, or 300 years ago.

G: Say 1000 years ago.

C: A 1000 years ago, there was a Cherokee lady who was making a pot something like you are.

G: Yeah, but somehow, I can't imagine. Because to me I know it's been done but I don't look at it like that. It's almost like, well it's where we're revising it, I don't know. I don't never see them doing it. I don't never see this being done before me. That's wild isn't it. I mean you know just thinking. But it has. I never thought about it till you mentioned it. It's just like this is just a... I'm stepping on new ground, I am stepping on new ground. I'm stepping on new ground and just keep going and going in several different directions.

C: And yet not being pulled apart even though you are stepping in different directions.

G: No. Sometimes I get to going a little bit and then I think Whoa. I'm serious, I'm talking about I get ahead of myself sometimes. I just need to slow down and stick with this a bit and then... make sure I got in conquered and then go on.

C: So, what are you working on right now in your pottery? Right now what are some of the techniques or processes that you're trying?

G: Mixing clay. Doing our mixing. Getting our shell temper in it. Making sure that we have a strong and sturdy enough. Gosh I wish I could remember. I am not good at remembering names. There was a man that traveled down out of... I think it was the Mississippi River and I don't know what kind of an expedition he was on. I am to make a pot right now. I was supposed to have it made by October and it's supposed to go on a world exhibit. I'm probably the only one that ain't got mine built. But anyways, this man when he... this expedition he was on, he about starved to death and he'd been on the river coming down wherever. And anyway the Indians, he got with the Indians, and he told this of how the Indians was living. He told this whole thing. Cause they took him in I guess and nourished him back. I'd have to get that name. You talk to Barbara ask her. She'd tell you. I can't think of the name right now. So, he told of the Indians making these big pots. We got to make one. They're talking about almost 20, I'm not going to make a 20 gallon. I think I can easily get away with maybe one about like this. But most of it had to do with how much shell, getting your clays the right texture and your mixture.

C: Do you work in a group or is it just you get together with other women to work or do you work on your own?

G: I work on my own. I work in my home but I do a lot of workshops.

C: This guild sounds like it's really been important to your development.

G: It has. It hasn't really we haven't got like the room but they're building on. It's in the making... put it in with the museum there. There was a friend, this girl that works, does a lot of work with me. I mean we share a lot of work together. There was this male friend of hers and anyway they both work at the Oconaluftee Indian village and she knows her history pretty good. They do lots of

studying in that and every spring of the year they go way back, way back in the mountains and they gather moss. I don't know what they use the moss for up there around the village, but anyway, he found a pot and I think that there was someone from Western bought that. It was... or I don't know where it's setting right now. He found that pot back in the mountains. And it was like, I guess from what I gather now there was like a small cave but the cave had kind of deteriorated you know and there was a ledge there and the pot was turned up. It was a cooking vessel. It come up like this and it come back out with a small opening like this, spread top and it was upside down like this and it was from white clay. He said he thought it was a rock. And see it was setting on a rock and there was a rock over it and it was like a ledge, like a pocket, I guess fixed for it. And it... a little bit of moss had grown right here. And I seen that pot and I even held the pot and looked at it. Inside the pot, you could see scratch marks where it had been stirred. Right here you could see where a spoon had been used and in the bottom of the pot where it was upside down like this and it had been, who knows, I have no idea how many years it could have been there. Who knows. You could see pitted spots, little pitted spots like where something had been cooked in it. And naturally I flipped the pot and went like that but you could smell a musty. You know how sometimes... like where it was stored and it was completely safe like this upside down. And he found that but the museums got it now.

C: I'll go look for that when I go to the museum next time. I wonder if it's on display or maybe not.

G: There was somebody from Western Carolina bought it. I think so.

C: Is that right?

G: I think so.

C: I find it hard to believe that we would have bought that though. I wonder that they would have sold it frankly.

G: Well either, like somebody from Western. I heard that because I was there the day when he sold it.

C: Well I'll ask Barbara about it when I see her.

G: Yeah, she'll probably show it to you. Cause I thought I seen it going back into the museum the other day. A guy was carrying it. He got out of a van and went in. Like I say I do a lot of work at the museum.

C: Now what about the stamps. Do you make your own stamps?

G: No I got cousins that can carve and they do and then there's special ones that will do the drawing off of the shards that they find like pieces of clay pots. Get the patterns off that and just put them on a paddle. That's about it.

C: Do you think that you are going to stick with these old-style stamp pottery or are you going to want to move on now? It seems like you're always looking for new things to do.

G: No, I'm talking about new things to do with this. And even with these you can do a lot of contemporary. you can do that too. I do. I do a lot of my own.

C: Kind of your own particular artistic vision.

G: Yeah. I'll make something going in one direction and just do what I want to.

C: Well, thanks very much.

G: You're very welcome.