

John Parris' interview with Duane King – Director of Cherokee Indian Museum

April 16, 1982

HL_MSS17-03_17_09_Parris_King_1982-04-16

Transcribed and Edited by

Christian Henderson

For ENGL 658 – Southern Literature

Instructor and General Editor: Dr. Mae Claxton

5 November 2025

Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography was prepared by students in ENGL 659: Southern Literature. The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

- Demonstrate proficiency with research tools and relevant technology for this subject along with appropriate scholarly material
- Communicate scholarly information to a group of peers
- Develop an appreciation of the culture, history, and art of the region

All work is presented as submitted by the graduate students. While they take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are possible. As they learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires meticulous research and corroboration by authoritative sources. Our objective is to provide transcriptions and annotations of WCU's Special Collections materials that will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, patrons, and all users of our library's resources. If you wish to submit an emendation or correction for this document, please email Dr. Mae Miller Claxton (mclaxton@wcu.edu)

Introduction

This edition is created from an audio recording of an interview between John Parris and Duane King on April 16, 1982. The recording is 8 minutes and 44 seconds long. During this interview Parris asks about a number of artifacts within the Cherokee Indian Museum, including stone mortars, a quern, khanomas, and stosi (pestles). They discuss the time periods in which these artifacts might have been constructed, but King emphasizes that it's difficult to put a specific date of construction to these artifacts. He says that it is much more important to look at the cultural context of the artifact.

John Parris

John Parris was a journalist most known for his “Roaming the Mountains” column in the *Asheville Citizen Time*. He was born on November 23, 1914 and grew up in Sylva, NC. He was offered a job by United Press (UP) and began working for them on his 17th birthday, making him “the nation’s youngest press associate reporter”

After stints in New York and Europe during World War II, he returned to western NC and wrote *The Cherokee Story*, which provided a brief history of the Cherokee people for the newly founded Cherokee Historical Association. Soon after, he accepted a job as the Director of Public Relations for the drama “Unto These Hills.” He worked for the Cherokee Historical Association for five years before he returned to the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, where he would stay for the next 42 years. During this time, he set out to “roam the mountains and tell the story of the region in terms of what it was like then and now.”

Parris' long and illustrious career resulted in more than 7,000 columns and five books. He has won numerous awards, such as the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award, North Carolina Folklore Association Award, and the inaugural Mountain Heritage Award from Western Carolina University. He has preserved a record of the knowledge, lives, and traditions of a generation of the everyday Appalachian; inspiring future Appalachian writers to continue his work (Casada, Jim).

Duane King

Duane King served as the director of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, now the Museum of the Cherokee People, from 1975 to 1982 (Museum of the Cherokee People). He went on to direct museums in Oregon, Los Angeles, New York City, and Oklahoma. He was also the founding editor of the Journal of Cherokee Studies, an adviser for the Smithsonian Institution's Museum for the American Indian, and a board member for the Trail of Tears Association (Chavez, Will)

Museum of the Cherokee Indian / Museum of the Cherokee People

The Museum of the Cherokee Indian opened in 1948 and is one of the oldest tribal museums in the United States. It was originally formed from a collection donated by Samuel E. Beck and was located in a small log cabin. Unfortunately, this building burned down in 1958, though the collections were thankfully off-site at the time. The museum was moved to a new, permanent building in 1976, meaning that this interview would have taken place 6 years afterward.

It is important to note that the museum was updated in 1998 and is currently undergoing a radical renovation to center the Cherokee people in “the way we want to present our Cherokee history, culture, and stories.” Consequently, visitors will likely see different content today than they would have during the recording of this interview in 1982 (*Main Exhibit*).

Associated Article

John Parris wrote an article titled “Cherokee Milling Tools Date to Biblical Times,” for the *Asheville-Citizen Times* that uses a quote and some information from this interview. However, his article primarily focuses on identifying milling tools in the Bible and information gathered by Horace Kephart and H.C. Wilburn. A transcription of this article is included below.

Editor’s Note

This edition of John Parris and Duane King’s 1982 interview attempts to be as faithful to the original recording as possible. To this end, any inconsistencies and filler words heard in the recording have been included in this transcription. An ellipsis is used to denote a prolonged pause in speech and timestamps are provided for context of the timeline of the interview.

Parenthesis within the text are used to mark brief interjections by the other speaker. Parentheses are also used to denote sounds like laughter.

Manuscript

John Parris: 00:00

Interview with Duane King, director of the Cherokee Indian Museum, April 16, 1982

And uh have you got any uh stone uh mortars¹ in the museum?

Duane King: 00:18

Yes, we do. In fact, we have quite a few of them.

John Parris: 00:24

Uh have you got any...any date area that they came out of?

Duane King: 00:29

Well, uh we've got some from the Middle Woodland period uh that came from a rock shelter in Tennessee, and it uh seems that...but the thing about them is uh they change very little in style from the Archaic period on up to the Mississippian period, and they were uh but uh...but the best cultural affiliation we have uh with some of the ones we've got uh is middle woodland, which would be uh five to uh...three to 500 AD, or three to 800 AD, in that period².

¹ A mortar is a bowl-like object that is typically paired with a pestle, which is a long grinding stone. Together, they can be used to grind objects, including nuts, medicines, and meat (Stanford University Archaeology Collections).

² According to the Museum of the Cherokee People, the Middle Woodland period refers to 1,000 BC – 900 AD, the Archaic period to 8,000-1,000 BC, and the Mississippian period to 900-1,500 AD in Cherokee history.

John Parris: 01:10

Uh BC?

Duane King: 01:12

AD.

John Parris: 01:12

All right now uh, of course, you know they go back all the way back to Biblical times (King: Yes, uh-huh). And I would just...so that would be 3 AD to 880 AD.

Duane King: 01:30

Well, 300 to 800

John Parris: 01:32

I mean 300 to 800

Duane King: 01:37

Right (Parris: Okay). But uh as I say, they're found throughout the prehistoric uh period. And it's very difficult uh uh looking at one to tell what it dates to. It just has to be...you just have have to have a cultural context for it.

John Parris: 01:52

Right. But that that uh...but of course, they were, they were using, when first white man came in, they were still using uh uh these things that which actually uh date back to Biblical times (King: Right). That's what...all right. Now, have you run into the quern³? The two stones for uh one was stationary and the other was uh revolved by hand, or pushed...

Duane King: 02:25

Like a mono...monotic?

John Parris: 02:27

They call them a quern.

Duane King: 02:33

Yeah uh, I'm really not that familiar with those

³ A quern is an ancient device for grinding grains. They date back to 10,000 BC and were primarily used in the British Isles and parts of Europe. They are still used in many parts of the world today (Bhattacharyya, Manjishtha).

John Parris: 02:35

But you don't have any of those in...

Duane King: 02:37

No, we don't (Parris: Uh)...well, I take that back. We've got some from the southwest that were used in that fashion, but we don't have any from this area.

John Parris: 02:47

Right. Well uh, Hiram Wilburn⁴, back in 1926 discovered a couple uh uh...down, about six miles below uh Bryson City (King: Uh-huh), where the Indians were hiding out⁵. And from the old timers and all they said they used them, and uh that the Indians did, to grind up grain. And then, of course, some of the early settlers uh here in 1700 and whatnot, use that hand...(King: Uh-huh) mill⁶. But he, he found these two, and they were not they...they were...did not have grooves in them as the later settlers used them (King: Uh-huh). And it could, uh he said, it looked like I said. This fellow said that they could also have been used as a lateral, sometimes as a ladder, the Indians could have used as a lateral movement too⁷ (King: Uh-huh). And uh those are supposed

⁴ In Parris' article, he identified Wilburn as "H.C. Wilburn of Waynesville, who did historical research for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park when it was being established."

⁵ According to Wilburn as recorded in Parris' article, "It was well known in local tradition that a number of Cherokee Indian families had hid out in this area during the removal period in 1938 and following, and that they eked out a most perilous existence for some months."

⁶ Based on his description, Parris is likely referring to a quern.

⁷ According to Wilburn as recorded in Parris' article, "these were of the crudest sort of querns. There was no sign of furrowing. The working faces were smooth and showed signs of abrasion by much use...discussing the probable use

to be somewhere in among the artifacts at Oconaluftee. They piled and they stored so much stuff they never got out for the museum if they ever get it...those are supposed to be up there tagged someplace. Uh when did uh, when did the Cherokees start using the uh making their mortars out of wood?

Duane King: 04:21

the Khanomas, uh the khanoma, uh the the tall wooden mortar?

John Parris: 04:28

Yeah, how do you...

Duane King: 04:29

Khanoma

John Parris: 04:30

How you spell it?

of these stones with the owner, he thought they were used only for crushing parched corn, and that the grinding was accomplished by lateral abrading actions rather than revolving the stone.”

Duane King: 04:31

I spell it, K H A N, O, M, A

John Parris: 04:32

Alright, k h n,

Duane King: 04:33

k h A

John Parris: 04:36

K H A N,

Duane King: 04:41

O (Parris: O?), long, O, its uh, a colon after the O, (Parris: Yeah) N, A. Khanoma

John Parris: 04:49

And is that an Indian word?

Duane King: 04:52

Yes.

John Parris: 04:52

From what tribe?

Duane King: 04:53

Cherokee

John Parris: 04:54

Cherokee, meaning what?

Duane King: 04:56

Uh that's the wooden mortar uh to grind corn in (Parris: Okay. Alright). And the pestle uh in

Cherokee is stosti, s, t, o, s, t, i,

John Parris: 05:07

s, t, o, s, t, i (King: Right) pestle. Okay, and when did you say the uh...the use of those?

Duane King: 05:18

Well, I think they probably coincide with uh metal tools. Uh I think it would have been very difficult uh to make those without metal uh (Parris: Mm-hm) uh but uh certainly during the 19th century, every Cherokee family had one, and a lot of them still do and still use it, (Parris: Mm-hm) uh but uh we have uh good evidence of their uh tradition, going back at least to the 19th century.

Uh the Smithsonian Institution had a Cherokee khanoma and stosion exhibit, and for it's either 40 or 70 years, they had the pestle upside down, with the large part in the in the mortar.

John Parris: 06:15

(laughter) Um-hum. Did you? Did you ever see the one that they uh they uh the one that uh...they used by taking a sapling and tying a pestle to it, and two people can work it up and down.

Duane King: 06:31

No I haven't.

John Parris: 06:33

That was one that followed that. I guess the white people were the ones that did that, that came uh...that was followed by the pounding mill, which was operated by water power⁸ (King: Right).

Okay, uh you haven't run across any of of of the uh stone uh mortars that was made of soapstone⁹, have you?

Duane King: 06:59

Uh yes, we have. Uh but most of those soapstone goals uh, or the soapstone things that are uh appear to be mortars, are actually pre-pottery vessels.

John Parris: 07:13

Uh-huh. Well, there's some indication that, you know, up where Judaculla rock is (King: Uh-huh) there was lot of soapstone up there, and some of the evidence back in '26 all been to people gone in, cut off that soapstone, but it seemed that they went in and carved them out (King: Uh-huh).

Was great big, you know, almost like uh...a stump size, (King: Uh-huh) and carved them out and then cut those things off (King: Uh-huh). The the bow. And some were and there was one

Wilburn uh oh and made a picture of that had never been completed. Was left for some reason, right.

⁸ Typically called a water mill, this machine can mill, roll, or hammer. They are used to produce goods like flour, lumber, and textiles (Angelakis, A. N., et al.).

⁹ Soapstone is composed primarily of talc, which makes it quite soft. It is named this because it feels "soapy or slippery" to the touch (King, Hobert M.).

Duane King: 07:56

We've got a quarry rock similar to that from North Georgia that was given to the museum two years ago, and it had three bowls cut off and another one uh grooved out very distinctively, but not uh...but still on the original stone (Parris: Yeah). But uh soapstone is so soft, uh it uh...it's not an ideal stone for a mortar.

John Parris: 08:20

No it (laughter) no, you'd wear that out pretty fast, wouldn't it?

Duane King: 08:23

Right. But prior to the introduction of pottery in this area, they were uh carving out steatite bowls, apparently for uh food preparation, either cooking or uh storage or or something (Parris: Mm-hm). But but we do have several of those.

John Parris: 08:42

Oh, okay, well, thank you very much Duane.

Duane King: 08:44

Okay, you're welcome.

John Parris

Bye.

Duane King

Bye.

Transcription - Cherokee Milling Tools Date to Biblical Times

John Parris – Roaming the Mountains

Sunday, April 18, 1982¹⁰

CHEROKEE – The first white men to come into these mountains 442 years ago this spring found the Cherokee Indians using implements for turning corn into meal that were old when Moses led his people to the Promised Land.

Hernando DeSoto, the Spanish Conquistador who tarried a while among the Cherokee in 1540¹¹, observed them milling corn with grinding stones or pounding it with stone mortar and pestle.

These implements might well have reminded the friars with him of similar ones mentioned in the bibles they carried.

For there are many biblical references to grain mills.

The simplest kind of mill used to grind grain was called a mortar – a hollowed out stone that help grain to be pounded by another stone.

A more efficient mill consisted of two circular stone slabs 20 inches across. A pivot secured the upper slab to the stone beneath. Women poured grain through the pivot hole in the

¹⁰ The interview with Duane King took place on April 16, 1982. This article was published two days later.

¹¹ Hernando DeSoto ventured into the Carolinas in the 1530s in an effort to find gold. He was known for abducting Native American women “for his men” and Native American men to use as guides (*History.com*).

upper stone, and it was ground as the wheel was turned with a wooden handle. The meal or flour was forced out between the two stones as more grain was added.

We first read of the grain mill in Exodus 11:5, which describes the custom of hiring women to turn it.

The wandering Israelites gathered manna¹² and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans and made cakes of it (Num. 11:8)

The millstone was so important to the Hebrew people that the Law stated “no man shall take the nether stone or the upper millstone,” for he would be taking a man’s life in pledge (Deut. 24:6)

In Abraham’s time, grain was pounded or ground by spreading it out on a flat stone and rubbing it with a round stone muller (Gen. 18:6). This type of grinding tool was found in the ruins of Jerico.

There are even biblical references to “corn.” In the King James version of the bible, references to corn, such as Deut. 23:25 and Matt. 12:1, actually mean various kinds of grain, including barley, millet, and wheat. And in Ruth 2:14, Boaz gave Ruth “parched corn,” grain that had been roasted.

Corn as we know it was not cultivated in the eastern hemisphere.

But the grain that DeSoto saw the Cherokee grinding and pounding in their stone implements is what we have come to call corn or maize.

¹² According to Merriam-Webster, manna is, “food miraculously supplied to the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness.”

In the Museum of the Cherokee Indian here, there are quite a few stone mortars.

“We’ve got some from the Middle Woodland Period (300 A.D. to 800 A.D.)” Dr. Duane King, the museum’s director, told me. “But the thing about them, they changed very little from the

- *Turn to Page 12A*

Archaic Period (8,000 B.C.) on up to the Mississippian Period (which ran from 1,000 A.D. to 1650 A.D.¹³).

“They are found throughout the prehistoric period and it’s very difficult by looking at one to tell what it dates to.”

The quern or rotary-stone type of grinding device observed by DeSoto was adapted by some of the first white settlers who came into the mountains in the late 1700s.

A few were still in use when Horace Kephart¹⁴ staked himself out a place in the Great Smokies in 1909.

In an article written for *Outing Magazine* in 1920, Kephart included a photograph showing a mountaineer grinding corn with a quern or handmill.

¹³ According to the Museum of Cherokee People as of 2025, the Archaic period spanned from 8,000-1,000 BC and the Mississippian period from 900-1,500 AD

¹⁴ Horace Kephart was an author and activist who used his writing to promote the creation of the Great Smokie Mountains National Park (*Horace Kephart: Revealing an Enigma*)

“The nether stone,” he wrote, “is set in a hollow log similar to a beegum. “The upper stone has a hole through the center, where the grain is fed by hand, and is turned round and round by a driving-stick, the upper end of which is held in position by a right-angled arm.”

The late H.C. Wilburn of Waynesville, who did historical research for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park when it was being established, once wrote that “it can not be said that querns were in actual use” in the Smokies in 1926-30.

“However,” he said, “several of the old settlers were familiar with them and had seen them in use in earlier times.”

Wilburn said that while “exploring” in a very secluded, and almost inaccessible area, some six miles down the Tuckasegee River from Bryson City, he found a pair of very crude quern stones.

“It was well known in local tradition that a number of Cherokee Indian families had hid out in this area during the removal period in 1838 and following, and that they eked out a most perilous existence for some months.

“The querns in question were collected for possible museum display. Only one family lived in the area at the time. The name is forgotten, but it is in the museum records. The man had, a good many years previously, used the querns as capstones on high wooden pillows under his barn. I helped him prise up the barn and replace the querns with other stones.

“As I stated previously, these were of the crudest sort of querns. There was no sign of furrowing. The working faces were smooth and showed signs of abrasion by much use. They were about 16 inches in diameter, three inches thick, roughly circular in shape, only the angular corners having been ‘pecked off’ with a hammer or, most likely, with another stone.

“Discussing the probable use of these stones with the owner, he thought they were used only for crushing parched corn, and that the grinding was accomplished by lateral abrading action rather than revolving stones.”

Wilburn tagged and catalogued the querns when he turned them over to park officials for display in a museum that was built at Floyd Bottoms above Cherokee but wasn't. The stones are still in storage with hundreds of other artifacts awaiting a museum that is among new plans for the park.

Work Cited

“1960 Hiram C. Wilburn.” *Asheville Museum of History*. <https://www.ashevillehistory.org/1960-hiram-c-wilburn/>. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025.

Angelakis, A. N., et al. “Sustainable and Regenerative Development of Water Mills as an Example of Agricultural Technologies for Small Farms.” *Water*, 14(10), 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w14101621>

Bhattacharyya, Manjishtha. "quern". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 10 Jul. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/quern>. Accessed 27 October 2025.

Casada, Jim. “John Alvis Parris, Jr. (1914-1999): Muse Of The Mountains.”

Chavez, Will. “Cherokee history, culture scholar dies.” *Cherokee Pheonix*, 3 Oct. 2017. https://www.cherokeephoenix.org/news/cherokee-history-culture-scholar-dies/article_a857c072-e78a-54fc-b3e4-1e6ea4fd2f87.html. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025

“Hernando de Soto.” *History.com*, <https://www.history.com/articles/hernando-de-soto>. Accessed 4 November 2025.

Hunter Library Special and Digital Collections and the Mountain Heritage Center. “About the Project.” *Horace Kephart: Revealing an Enigma*, 2005, <https://www.wcu.edu/library/digitalcollections/kephart/aboutproject.htm>

King, Hobert M. “Soapstone: What is Soapstone? How Does it Form? What is it Used?” *Geology.com*. <https://geology.com/rocks/soapstone.shtml>. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025

Main Exhibit. Museum of the Cherokee People, Cherokee NC.

“Manna definition.” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manna>.

Accessed 4 November 2025.

Parris, John. “Cherokee Milling Tools Date to Biblical Times.” *Asheville-Citizen Times*, 18 April 1982, p. 1A-12A.

Stanford University Archaeology Collections. “Ohlone Mortar and Pestle.” *Stanford University Archaeology Center*. <https://museum.stanford.edu/exhibitions/melancholy-museum-love-death-and-mourning-stanford/mortar-pestle#:~:text=The%20Ohlone%20mortar%20and%20pestle%20is%20a,the%20fields%20with%20laborers%20collecting%20the%20artifacts>. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025.

The Museum of Cherokee People. “Duane H. King (1947-2017) passed away on Sunday...”

Facebook, 19 September 2017,

<https://www.facebook.com/MuseumoftheCherokeePeople/posts/1644657288899891/>