

On the Trail

The making of an epic movie immortalizing the Cherokee's westward march

By Patricia Kirk

A 16-MONTH-LONG TREK THAT TOOK a movie crew to seven states to document the truth about the Trail of Tears ended on a searing hot weekend in June, with filming of the Cherokee people's arrival in their present-day homeland of Tahlequah, Okla.

Trail of Tears filmmakers Steven Heape and Chip Richie of Dallas-based Rich-Heape Films, Inc., had announced the call for Native American extras in local newspapers and on Web sites. The duo had relied on local Orvel Baldrige, an Oklahoma casting director, to get the word out and ensure that people would show up at the auditorium in the Cherokee Nation's headquarters. "But truthfully, we had no clue how many would show up that first day," recalls Heape. "We could only anticipate and hope, but we really didn't know."

So, when several hundred people showed up, young and old, they were delighted. Cherokee people had come from all over the Southwest and Midwest and from as far away as California to represent their ancestors' ordeal.

Some people came already dressed in 18th century costumes and waited patiently while others lined up to be issued period rags; given a bad hair day; have eye make-up and nail polish removed; and dirt smeared on their faces, hands and clothing. One woman frowned when told her eye make-up had to go, saying: "What if they take a close-up of me?" And a couple of teenage girls went along with the drill, but showed up on the set later on with eye make-up back on, only to have make-up artist Patti

Burris wipe it off again.

The location was about 10 miles south of town in rural Cherokee County, on a 400-acre ranch donated for two days of shooting by owner Boyd Walker, who is now considering erecting a monument to commemorate the event. The site's grassy knoll provided the perfect landscape for shooting the reenactment of the arrival scene, in which the filmmakers

rying wool coats and blankets to wear on the downhill reenactment and wiping sweat from their brows with the edge of a blanket or shirt cuff. A few people succumbed to the heat, requiring EMS assistance to cool them down, but about 200 extras filed down the hill in a S-shaped curve around the knoll, looking cold, weary and hungry as the director bellowed out "No Sweating!" and then "Action!" to start the camera rolling.

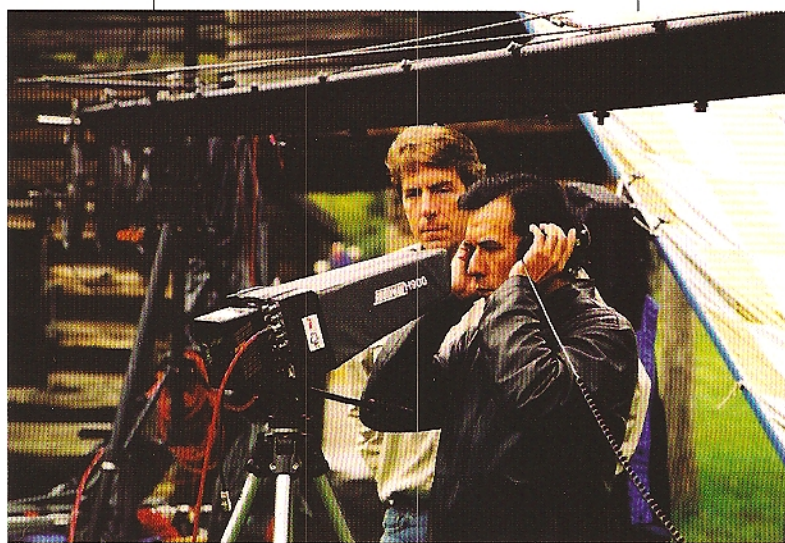
Shooting resumed the next day at the Cherokee Heritage Center, which has historical recreations of the early Tahlequah village and Georgia internment camp, where the Cherokee were held prior to removal and where hundreds died after being issued blankets used in hospitals that were infected with small pox, typhoid and other contagious diseases. About 100 extras returned the second day for reenactments of the internment camp; George "Sequoyah" Guess, Cherokee syllabary inventor (played by Greg Howard) teaching children to write in their Native tongue; and John Ross (played by Eddie Swimmer) announcing to Western Cherokees his authority as Chief of the Cherokee Nation.

The Oklahoma shoot was one of 10 major location shoots to capture historic locations and interviews with scholars and Cherokee storytellers, notes Richie. Over the last 16 months,

the crew shot narration with well-known Cherokee Actor Wes Studi and reenactments with actors at Cherokee Chief Major John Ridge's home in Rome, Ga.; recreated Cherokee villages in Westfield, Ga., and Cherokee, N.C.; the last Cherokee capital in New Echota, Ga.; and Red Clay, Ga., where General Wool met with John Ross to inform him of the impending removal. "General Wool was sent to tell the people they had to move," says Richie. "The federal government was concerned there would be an uprising, so Wool was sent to take the temperature of the people."

"The removal was done very well," notes Heape, with a hint of sarcasm. "At some of the historical locations where we wanted to shoot, particularly south Georgia, there are no Indians, because they had all been removed. We had to bring Native Americans from North Carolina, which was an unanticipated expense," he adds.

Other locations included a narration shot at Mantel Rock, Ky., where people on the trail sought shelter and many perished waiting out a winter storm, and Maine, where the winter



Producer/Director Chip Richie and voice on camera actor Wes Studi review a take during filming of the Trail of Tears in Cherokee, NC.

Photo courtesy of Rich-Heape Films

hoped to bring to life the cover illustration on John Ehle's book, *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation*. It also provided a backdrop for several generic trail shots, including a campsite, rainstorm and burial scenes; John Ross writing in his journal; and white traders selling whiskey to young American Indian men.

Historically, the arrival occurred during a cold snap in late October, so the extras trudged up the hill in the scorching midday heat, car-

entrenchment reenactment was actually shot using people from the Malseet Tribe. "It was a challenge finding snow in April," Richie explains, noting that the only place that worked at that time of year was Maine, because a Rocky Mountains backdrop would have been geographical unsuitable. The location of an 18th century keelboat on the Missouri River took the crew to South Dakota for a reenactment of a Mississippi River crossing, with Lakota people filling in for the Cherokee.

"We were very impressed with the quality and caliber of talent of people who came to be part of this," says Heape, noting that the "arrival" scene was the production climax and involved the most people. "These were mostly amateur actors in summer dramas and people who had experience in public speaking as storytellers or artisans explaining their craft. When it was over, we got e-mails from participants thanking us. ... One woman said it was a spiritual experience for her to be able to represent her ancestors."

Additionally, Cherokee historians and storytellers were on location to offer advice on authenticity, including Gayle Ross, a descendent of John Ross; Tom Belt of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma; Freeman Owle; Myrtle Driver; and Chief Michelle Hicks of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) in North Carolina and Georgia.

When done, what the cinema duo hopes to achieve is an accurate account of the relocation of the Cherokee people, all 17,000 of them, from the Southeast to Oklahoma and reveal this dark event in American history for what it was: the first American ethnic cleansing. Heape says the idea for the film was first proposed 12 years ago to the EBCI and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, both of which eventually partnered with Rich-Heape Films in the venture.

"This story has been passed down in Cherokee oral history for 168 years," says Heape, who is a direct descendant of Nancy, or "Nanye," Ward, a member of the first families of the Cherokee Nation, known as a peacemaker during the tumultuous 1830s in south Georgia. "You don't learn about this in high school history class. It's one of the dark secrets, hidden under the guise of Manifest Destiny, that goes against tenants of the American Constitution.

"We thought this story should be told from the Cherokee perspective, rather than from what's written in history books," Heape emphasizes. "There's lots of conflicting information that through research, in collaboration with the Eastern Band of Cherokee, provides a clear picture of what really happened."

"We came across works by modern historians who interrupted the writings of that time, stories written with a prejudice edge

about what went on," notes Richie. "Southern newspapers said this was a 'glorious undertaking,' and newspapers in the Northeast reiterated what was reported in the southern newspapers."

"So it's a matter of interruption, and the oral history of the Cherokees must be taken

to find when they arrived, they had been taken advantage of by shady contractors, who give them poor quality goods — maggots in the beef and weevils in the cornmeal — so the people were constantly going hungry."

The Cherokee, notes Heape, were not the savages portrayed in Hollywood films of buf-



A Cherokee family seeks shade from a wagon as they await the next scene during filming of the Trail of Tears in Tahlequah, OK. Photo courtesy of Rich-Heape Films

into consideration," he continues, pointing out that the accuracy of oral tradition was demonstrated when an ancient Hopi medicine kit was found that contained the same herbs Native Americans use today for medical purposes. "So what matters is the accuracy of the oral stories of the Trail of Tears that were passed down from generation to generation, which cannot be discounted."

What is known is that the removal from Georgia was, indeed, brutal. The state's legislature passed laws to eliminate the Cherokee people's voice from the dialogue. "They couldn't contest the laws," says Richie. "At the same time, the state held a land lottery and passed out deeds to Cherokee-owned land to white settlers."

"Once the Removal Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, people who held the deeds went with the Georgia Guard to claim the land and force the Cherokees to leave," he says. "No money was offered. The federal government promised to pay the Cherokee Nation for the land, but they received very little of it, other than funds to hire contractors for the removal."

The Cherokee did not lack organization, setting up a supply line to provide food every 50 to 100 miles along the trail to Oklahoma, Richie says. "They contracted for good supplies, only

falo-hunting Plains Indians wearing Eagle headdresses. "They had adapted to Western culture, owned businesses and slaves and farmed. There was the perception that the government was removing savages with no sense of civilization, but they had their own Cherokee alphabet, and 80 percent of the people could read and write, compared with about 10 percent of whites at the time. If anything, they probably inspired jealousy, because they were so successful in business," he says.

Besides Studi, the movie features narration by James Earl Jones, who narrated a previous documentary by Rich-Heape Films, *Black Indians: An American Story*; James Garner; Crystal Gayle; and Rita Coolidge. All are of Cherokee descent. The film involves both black and white Cherokee, as Cherokee people had owned slaves and interracial marriages were common.

Richie and Heape plan to submit *Trail of Tears* to the Sundance Film Festival next spring and, if accepted, hope it gets picked up for theatrical distribution.

"This is a beautiful film that tells an incredible story," says Richie. "We're shooting this in High Definition, and the picture quality is really terrific. The detail is so incredible, viewers will feel like they're really there." □