

Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution
Stories: Yes | Student Digital Storytelling Project
Chief Gary Batton, Oklahoma

Speaker 1: I don't know if I'd say the traditions or if I would say the culture of our foods. And the reason why our foods are important to us is one, it's healthy, and well-being. But it also stimulates our true culture, so when you start learning about some of our food, it's about the family. Here in the Choctaw Nation, we say our vision is living up to Choctaw spirit of faith, family and culture. So when you start getting people growing their own food, guess what? They begin to get healthier, they eat healthier, they spend more time with their family, they just practice their faith, and so the food is just a mechanism for a way of being a part of a greater purpose of a community and a family.

Speaker 1: [:55] Well, one is just to get involved. I mean, I think so many people are worried about "Oh my God, what if I say the language wrong?" "What if I pronounce this food wrong?" or something. My thing is it's just like anything else. Learn, understand that you're gonna make mistakes. Don't worry about it, overcome it, and just keep trying to learn and to keep that perseverance, so that people will learn. If we don't, that legacy will never pass on to our people.

Speaker 1: [1:20] And that's what I think has happened within the Choctaw Nation, is that people has gotten so scared of the culture that they don't know about. That's the reason why we have our language program. We do have our food programs and things like that, to help revitalize and make it become common say and common practice when we talk about foods, when we talk about our language, so that it becomes just a daily practice. Oh, definitely. I mean, again, I think about my family when I think about the food, because although our family always got together, I grew up where my aunts and uncles and cousins all lived around me. So when we would get together, especially like Thanksgiving, we would have issi nipi, which is deer meat, and we'd have tanchi labona, we would have some of our tribal cultural foods. Again, it's about bringing that family together, it's us understanding that like our aunts and uncles would say, issi nipi.

Speaker 1: [2:17] And peoples like "What are you talking about?" Well you learn, that's deer meat. So, it's alt funi, when we'd have squirrel and dumplings, funi means squirrel in Choctaw, and so it's just been chukfi, which is rabbit, so it's when you start learning, it's a way of learning, it's a way of keeping that culture and history alive, it's a way of your family staying united. So, that's what I remember as a kid, growing up and just everybody having a great time together. Of course, I've probably been from Southeastern Oklahoma. And I love isi nipi, which is our deer meat but I do love tanchi labona and I do love squirrel and dumplings. I love that type of food, it's very good, it's sweet of course.

Speaker 1: [3:08] And so those are the main ones that I can think of that comes to mind. It's both, for me it's spiritual and it's personal. Because again when I think about my family and all of us coming together, we all sat down, we all pray together. Everybody bless the food. You know it was about again that greater family. Everybody had a purpose. It felt like you had a sense of belonging in this family what your role was. And so it was personal to me. For

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everybody to come together and eat these food but it was also the spiritual side of it, of understanding that we had a bigger purpose greater than us. And it was about God. And it was about our family standing united and strong. One is just our uniqueness of from coming across "The Trail of Tears".

Speaker 1: [4:06] You know in 1930, we signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. And so that's the Five Civilized Tribes is different than most any other tribes across the whole United States. And so it separates us from the rest of the tribe but then also I think it makes us unique in that we are the first Native Americans. We are the first Americans here. And so I think there's a sense of purpose and belonging because of that.

Speaker 1: [4:32] But it's also the reason why I like our code talkers, that they volunteered. Native Americans we volunteer at the highest level than any other race in regards to service to our military men and women. And it's because it's our home. This is who we protect, it's Tushka. It's a word that's a reason why, we are who we are. First of all I've locked time literally every month, that I go to various communities throughout the Choctaw Nation. And what I do is learn. You have to listen and so when I go out about then I listen to our tribal members to see what their needs are. How we serve their needs. So how can we improve, what you know, just all those types of things, what's good, what's not good. You got to be loyal to accept the good. You got to be willing to accept the bad. And then you got to put that into action. And which we do an annual strategic planning process. So it's all about understanding and staying connected to them.

Speaker 1: [5:33] I believe as chief, I don't know if you noticed that my office here is on first floor. Everybody that comes into the building all those things are going to be on the fifth floor. But it's about I want to be accessible to our tribal members. That's who I serve. That's who I represent. And so that's just some of the way I stay connected but also with our employees. I just finish having lunch with one of our IT guys, and so it's just to understand what's going on in IT. Ask them how can we as leadership support them better, What resources do they need, what guidance, direction? So that's just a few of the ways that I stay connected with the community but it's always and of course every month we have some type of function in the community. I think for me is for people to understand who they are. And be accepting of who they are. I knew when I grew up that I knew it was chopped off, but I didn't know the culture in history.

Speaker 1: [6:32] And so for me understanding now that I can be chopped off I can be in this fast-paced technology driven world, still remain Who I am, understand I can play stickball and that's okay. I can speak our language and that's okay. I can also speak English you know. I can also speak little bit of Spanish, a little bit of Russian. And so it's okay to understand that you're all it's okay to be that. So that's an empowerment. So I want my legacy to be empowered to reach your goal, your destiny.

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Speaker 1: [7:03] That's all about freedom for yourself, that's independence for you. So that's kind of what this country was all built upon, the United States. And so for me if you can ever achieve that and be passionate about what you're looking to do. I would love to do that but that so that's what I would like for the tribal tribal members. Institutionalize if I would say what do I run for the tribe is the nation. I want to leave it in better shape than it is, which means I'm going to have people in the right seat in the right places. That they can sustain and grow the tribe forever, so leadership development some real important piece to me. And then the other piece is financial sustainability. We've got to make sure that they have resources for the future. So if you have people in place you have money in place, things can happen.