



A Cherokee elder/storyteller/maskmaker carves a new mask out of hickory.



Mary Thompson uses butternuts to make dye for her baskets. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MILENKA KAHN



Hendersonville's David Weintraub is seen on the Blue Ridge Parkway. His latest documentary film chronicles the lives of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. PROVIDED BY LIZ WEINTRAUB

‘Everyone has a story’

Weintraub's latest film documents lives of Cherokee Indians

Dean Hensley Hendersonville Times-News | USA TODAY NETWORK

Longtime filmmaker David Weintraub said his 50th film may be his last, but then again, it might not be.

“I have decided not to decide right now. Filmmaking is one of the most joyful things I have ever done. But it is also the hardest. It’s draining and overwhelming, and I need some time to refill the well. I know I’ll continue to make short films, but it probably will be awhile before I’ll make another feature-length film,” he told the Times-News on June 6.

His 50th film is titled “Nature’s Wisdom Thru Native Eyes” and chronicles the livelihood of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. Its world premiere will be June 24-July 1 in the Hendersonville area, a place he is proud to call home.

Weintraub, a native of Brooklyn, New York, and a graduate of Stony Brook University said he never meant to become a filmmaker.

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Cherokee elders and storytellers Lloyd Arneach Sr. and Davy Arch share a laugh with Sappony storyteller Rober “Redhawk” Eldridge. PROVIDED BY MILENKA KAHN

Story

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"What started as a traveling museum exhibition metamorphosed into a film because I realized the best way to tell the story was through film. Since I never went to film school, I had to pony up fast on how to do it by working with veterans in the field. Hopefully, I absorbed some of what they were teaching me," he said. "Filmmaking really started for me as a by-product of an oral history project I launched to help tell the forgotten stories in the Jewish, African American and Cuban communities in South Florida. I found their stories fascinating and I discovered that oral histories unearthed the richness of the human tapestry like no other form ... work that I continued here in the Southern Appalachians while running ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, and ultimately in the founding of the Center for Cultural Preservation, the organization I now run."

The premieres are as follows with a starting time of 7:30 p.m.:

• **June 24:** North River Farms in Mills River, a drive-in theater with seating options (weather date: June 30)

• **June 29:** The Orange Peel in Asheville

• **July 1:** Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville

His mother's inspiration

He said the idea for the film was inspired by the words of his mother.

"My mother was a storyteller and she'd tell me those great Americana stories like the Jack tales but also the stories from the Iroquois, the Cherokee, Apache and more," Weintraub said. "I particularly loved the stories about nature ... those about the 'tree people' and the 'frog people' and the 'possum people.' I always assumed that these stories were wonderful metaphors for the close relationship native people had with the living world."

"But I was wrong. It was far more than that. Western culture sees humans at the top of the ladder and everything else below. But native people believe that since humans were the last to come, plants and animals are our teachers. Western science is just starting to catch up with this ancient wisdom."

He said he believed it could make a "fascinating film" to look at the living world through a native lens and then approach scientists who could verify that what native people have been saying for tens of thousands of years is actually true.

"I've been working with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians for nearly 15 years. I've been intrigued by their connection to the living world, their preservation of their traditions and their willingness to share their cultural history with the world. There are certain areas that remain only open to tribal members, but for the most part, the Cherokee have so much to still teach us today, and I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to interview several dozen Cherokee elders over the years," Weintraub said.

Interviewing the Cherokee

Weintraub said when talking with the Cherokee Indians, the main thing it took was the willingness to show respect and the eagerness to listen.

"I was blessed to have interviewed native storytellers as well as other native elders who gave me their perspective on how stories connected their tribe to the natural world for thousands of years. Those stories maintained respect for their surroundings and created a heightened level of awareness," he said.

Weintraub said it was through that observation that native people became great conservationists long before anyone else thought about "the environment."

"We tend to see the living world outside of a window in our office, car or house. They live in that world and by living in it, they were able to describe to me the great love and passion they had for protecting it," he said. "One of the things I started to learn from these interviews was that we often make this false dichotomy that either we're protecting the planet or developing it. But the Cherokee weren't just watching nature, they were actively managing it. They burned forests in prescribed burns to protect plants and animals; they used harvesting techniques that actually increased plant vitality and animal integrity. What the scientists, like our own Steve Pettis, Cooperative Extension agent, describes is that they were wise users of nature."

Everyone has a story to tell

When he first came to the Southern Appalachians, Weintraub was told that mountain elders would never talk to him.

"People want to keep to themselves, and they certainly don't want to talk to someone who isn't from here. Well, I got



Sister and daughter basketmakers Mary Thompson and Sarah Thompson make baskets. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MELENKA KAHN

here as I Quick as I could," he said. "What I found was that when I was introduced to an elder, whether they be Scots-Irish, African American or Cherokee, I'd tell them about the story of my grandmother who knew hundreds of stories and the old folk songs from the old country and how much I loved talking to her and learning from her. I realized then how much wealth there was from being with elders."

He then asked if the Indians would be willing to share their stories with him, and they did.

"Now that I've completed nearly 500 oral histories in these hills, I realize that everyone has a story to tell but too often we are too busy staring at our devices and keeping busy to listen. My experience is that people want to share the challenges that they've encountered and the joys they've celebrated and they're just waiting for someone to listen. We're often too distracted to take the time to be there for them. The result is, they don't get heard and just as important, we've lost an opportunity to learn from them," he said.

A choice of two stories

Weintraub has been a longtime local supporter of ways to support, conserve and maintain the environment. He said through this filmmaking process, he learned even more from the Cherokee.

"Living in harmony with the living world doesn't mean we don't grow food, hunt, or develop land. It means we do it with reverence and respect for nature. I think ultimately the theme of the film became we can live in a developed world that works or one that doesn't. When we have respect for the natural world that sustains us, we thrive. When we don't, well we have pretty much what we have today, where our water, land and air are threatened by pollution, overdevelopment and loss," he said.

He said we have a choice of two stories: The one that says we have the right to extract and deplete our world into oblivion or the other one that says we can live in gratitude and reciprocity with the living world as true stewards of creation.

"Our lives all have common threads, and when we embrace them, we become a stronger community. When we focus on our differences, we become weaker," he said.

He said too often what we understand about history is really mythology, not fact, which is why his filmmaking work is always focused on telling the rest of the story.

"For instance, my film about the 1916 Flood ('Come Hell or High Water, Remembering the Great Flood of 1916') focused not only on this terrible natural disaster but on the incredible resilience of the mountaineers who knew how to survive difficult circumstances and were challenged in incredible ways by the storm but persevered. My film on Appalachian music history ('A Great American Tapestry') looked not only on the rich cultural legacy brought here from the British Isles, but also the African American traditions that strongly influenced what ultimately became American traditional music like old-time and bluegrass, and it also was shaped in many ways by indigenous traditions as well," he said. "What I discovered in my research in making the film was that it was the blended musical traditions that really made Southern music so contagious and beautiful. We often lose that sense of the connecting strands of history in the polarized world we live in today."

More information about Weintraub and "Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes" is available at www.SaveCulture.org or by calling 828-692-8062.

Deann Hetsley is the news editor for the Hendersonville Times-News. Email him with tips, questions and comments at DHetsley@gannett.com. Please help support this kind of local journalism with a subscription to the Hendersonville Times-News.



Mary Thompson's grandson, Choji Thompson, is seen making a basket.



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