Winnie Guess Perdue Interview

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Winnie Guess Perdue
Transcript of an oral history interview conducted
by Lorretta Bertalot at Tulsa Historical Society & Museum on September 6, 2023

00:01 Birth and name

[Lorretta: Winnie, what is your whole name?] I am Winnie May, Guess is my maiden name, Perdue. I was born on November 5th, 1937. So, I'll be 86, I'll do the math for you. I'll be 86 this November in about a month, a month and a half. [Lorretta: okay. You are going to be telling some things about the Cherokee Nation. Do you have a Cherokee name?] You know, I have a name that my dad would call me which [translates to] Rabbit. He also had an English name for me which was Lady. The reason he called me Lady was because mother would take me to the Methodist Circle meetings. I was never left with a sitter, that was unheard of really. I was an only child. [Parents were Virginia and George Guess.] She would take a little rocker that he had made for me and I would sit in the little rocker and never say a word and never move. So, because of that he always called me Lady. They could take me anyplace and I would behave.

01:45 Greatest honor received from Cherokee Nation

[Lorretta: Why don't you just start with your story? I'll just let you lead this.] As I said, I am Winnie May Guess Perdue. I am designated Culture Keeper of Cherokee Nation. I am a proud enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation. I now am considered a groundbreaking, one of the first women, fancy dancers. About five to six years ago, the Cherokee Nation named me one of five women who changed the world. I was keeping very good company with our Chief Wilma Mankiller and Nanyehi, who is a beloved woman of Cherokee Nation. That's probably the greatest honor I've ever received.

[Exhibit: "Cherokee Women Who Changed the World" highlighted the accomplishments and historical significance of five women: Wilma Mankiller, Nancy Ward, Anna Mitchell, Winnie Guess Perdue and Golda Ross. The exhibit was displayed at the Cherokee National Supreme Court Museum in Tahlequah in 2016.]

02:55 Death of grandparents, children taken to Sequoyah Indian Training School (orphanage)

I'll start back with my father [George Guess.] This is long before Oklahoma became a state, we're in Indian Territory and he's on our original allotment with his family. They were very prosperous—had cattle and farming. This was right over past No Head Hollow outside of Tahlequah. Both of his parents [Addie Ratt Guess and Watie Guess] probably succumbed to tuberculosis because the Natives had no natural immunity to that. He and his siblings were grieving the loss of their parents and one morning there was dust on the road. They knew someone was coming to their place. A wagon came up and it was the Indian Agent.

He said the oldest daughter should get all the family belongings together, the family Bible and a bit of clothing. They were coming to pick them up the following day because now they're orphans. That, of course, was alarming to them. My aunt Sarah was the oldest, she was maybe fourteen. My daddy was the youngest. She took those instructions and began to get everything ready for them to come and pick them up. My uncle Willy was the oldest fellow, about seventeen, and he ran away that night. He did not want to succumb to that. So, they followed the instructions.

A wagon came and picked them up the following day and took them into Tahlequah and outside of Tahlequah to the Sequoyah Indian Training School. That's what it was called. It previously had been established as a Cherokee asylum. They called it an insane asylum but they changed it right away, after only about two years, because there was no one to go there. So that tells us a little bit about living with nature, having a respect for the land and for the country. Our people had that and we were very secure in it so we found we did not need the asylum but they changed it to an orphanage.

My daddy and his sisters were there [at the orphanage.] They were punished for speaking Cherokee. That was the only language they knew. They were first speakers—they were punished for that so they had to try to learn [English]. My aunt Nannie, aunt Sarah and aunt Jennie would visit us and tell us they would wait until night and the lights were out in the [girl's] dorm and they would, of course, speak to each other in Cherokee. You know, a sad thing, my daddy was the only boy and the youngest. So, they were waiting for the lights to go out so they could speak but my daddy just had to wait. He had no one to talk to—he's in the boy's dorm and he was fearful – it was not his family.

[Lorretta: What year are we talking, Winnie?] Oh goodness, this is like I say, before statehood [1907.] Oh my, I'd have to think about that. [Lorretta: Do you know when your family came to Oklahoma?] Oh no, there are no records of that or anything. I'm glad you brought that up. None of my daddy's family had birth certificates because they were born in Indian Territory. What we do know is that we are direct descendants of Sequoyah. My father is great-great-grandson of Sequoyah.

07:07 Sequoyah and Cherokee removal

We know that Sequoyah went to Arkansas and settled there before the removal because he was quite a visionary. They considered him a genius at that time, you know, having written the alphabet. He could see this was coming, that removal was coming, and he came ahead. Like I say, quite a visionary and he came to Arkansas. So, all those dates are lost to the ages. There is no record and without official birth certificates, that was something unheard of at the time.

[Lorretta: Do you think Sequoyah came to Arkansas before the removal? Maybe close to it because they knew it was coming? So, we can get a general idea.]

Sequoyah was part of the contingency that would travel to Washington and make the case—he was involved in all that. He realized, from his standpoint, that it was ultimately going to happen. Of course, [President] Andrew Jackson was no friend to the Cherokee. Because of his removal

policies, it became apparent that it was going to happen. They actually had gone through all the legalities. A lot of people don't realize the Cherokee people were highly educated at that time. We were educating our young men in the universities back East then. So, we were able to tell our story, negotiate, do everything. There was a document that had enough signatures that the President should have recognized. He [Andrew Jackson] said, "let them enforce it" and the removal took place. I guess you'd say it was part of the Manifest Destiny that they would move forward. Sequoyah, having been involved in all that, been part of the delegation, realized it was coming.

09:46 "Searching for Sequoyah" documentary on PBS

He was quite a thinker because later I did a PBS Special. The University of Oklahoma and, I believe, the University of Georgia, partnered on that [2021.] We traveled to Zaragoza, Mexico, and filmed a documentary, "Searching for Sequoyah." At that point, Sequoyah had walked from Arkansas to Mexico and he died there. Of course they had always been seeking his final resting place. [Lorretta: I saw that documentary. It's been in the last few years.] Yes, we went there about six years ago. It was remarkable to trace that and it has always given me so much encouragement.

11:00 Father foresaw her future, college at Northeastern

My father and my mother both had high expectations – the bar was set high for me. Again, I was an only child. My daddy is pure-blood Cherokee. He worked as a translator for the Bureau of Indian Affairs much of his life. I'll return to that original story. There they are, at Sequoyah [orphanage] in Tahlequah. All of them graduated and went on to Haskell Institute, so [they are] college educated. All my aunts became teachers.

My daddy was a translator for the BIA. We moved to Pryor, Oklahoma, that's where we were. Life happened. We were separated as a family from my aunts but they would travel [back to Oklahoma] every other year, they'd come from California and Salt Lake City, all teaching at Indian schools. So that was another facet.

The interesting part of it, when I was enrolled at Northeastern, in Tahlequah, I was packing, getting ready to go, and my daddy said, "Winnie, you will always walk in two worlds." I always have. [Lorretta: He saw your future.] Yes, yes, again, their expectation was high.

12:38 First meeting with uncle Willy Guess, start of World War II

So, I'm a freshman at Northeastern. The first week or so we walked into town and right there, in front of the Cherokee headquarters, were a couple of old fellows who were whittling. You know, Cherokee men. One of them called to me, "Winnie." It was my uncle Willy, the one [father's brother] who had run away. We had never really been in touch with him because he had run to the hills and remained there. He did not speak English. He had recognized me because I had appeared at the Cherokee Holiday. I was there the years before it was even designated and called Cherokee Holiday—I would dance and perform. It kind of let you know, my daddy was telling me that I would be walking in two worlds, and there I found my uncle Willy who had always walked in one.

[Lorretta: Was he at the Cherokee Courthouse, right there on [the] main street?] Yes, and the headquarters—benches there. [Lorretta: I remember when I was young, especially on Saturdays, always a gathering of the Natives, and most were speaking Cherokee.] Yes, that was the site. Sure. My daddy and his family, his sisters, they always spoke Cherokee when they visited, you know, but their visits were few.

Then the war [World War II] happened. My father was too old to be drafted and with a family, so we moved to Tulsa. He worked at the power plant in Pryor initially, then he came to work in Tulsa at the munition. So, I lived in Tulsa for a brief time.

14:30 First day of school in Tulsa

My mother was a schoolteacher, I have to tell you, in a one-room school outside of Porum, between Porum and Warner, Oklahoma. That's all Cherokee country and allotments down there. She was teaching Cherokee students English and they were teaching her Cherokee. We had a lot of educators in my family. I go to school [in Tulsa] the first day and they [her parents] are eager to hear about it, so we're having dinner and my daddy said, "Winnie, how was your first day of school?" "Oh, I got put back." They thought, well, she's in kindergarten, if she got put back she's been sent home.

My mother accompanied me to school the following day. We went to the principal's office and he says, "Oh, no, Mrs. Guess, she was put up – so she's in a new room today – she's in first grade. I'll just walk you down there, we'll walk down together and meet the new teacher because she was put up yesterday." So, we go in and the teacher says, "Oh, Winnie, we're looking for you." Mother and the principal were talking to the side. The teacher said to me, "What is your last name? I want to put you in alpha order." I said, "Guess." The teacher, she was humoring me, said, "Oh now, that's good, okay." I was barely five. She asked again, "I'm going to be seating everyone so I'll have a way to keep track of all the students, so what is your last name? "Guess."

About that time, my mother and the principal thought, "What's going on?" The teacher bent forward, "You are now in the first grade. We do not play guessing games." She was getting irate. Of course, the principal rushed up and said, "Oh no, her name is Guess."

Probably that day started me off on realizing I became an instant celebrity. Either one, they thought I was being impudent, asking the teacher to guess my name, or they realized that there is so much value and power in words. So, I have always had my voice. I've always felt that I had a platform and I've always been an ambassador for the Cherokee Nation. You know, that set me in motion.

17:43 Family moved to Muskogee, Indian Centennial celebration parade

We moved to Muskogee and there I had the most unique journey. All the leaders of the town are dentists, lawyers, doctors—all were Indian. I had a unique experience as a child, growing up in a place where everybody was Indian, claimed to be, or wished they were. What a unique situation is that?

Every parade, everything that ever happened, my daddy and I, as direct descendants of Sequoyah—We were a part of it. The Indian Centennial happened when I was about ten, maybe twelve. We rode on a float and Daddy depicted Sequoyah. On one side of the float, he was teaching the Bacone College students Cherokee and the syllabary. On the other end, there were all the Bacone students that were depicting graduating with their mortar boards and gowns. So it was, once again, an emphasis on education. They gave me a large bouquet of roses. I was sitting at the front of the float. What an amazing experience! It was fun to me, we went down and gathered at the parade opening. I saw lots of people and they took a picture on a stagecoach—What's not to like for a child? Now, with the photographs and the history of it, it's recognized as something almost of great value.

19:41 Selected as protégé of Yvonne Chouteau, Indian ballerina

It was at that time I began to study ballet and had the opportunity to perform before Yvonne Chouteau. She, at that time, was dancing with the Ballet Russe [de Monte Carlo] and one of the five Indian ballerinas. I did not know it was an audition that my teacher had planned. She [Chouteau] selected me to be her protégé and go to New York City and study there. I was already enrolled in the Professional Children's School—It was going to be a huge thing. Again, my daddy's pure-blood Cherokee. He's not going to New York. He's going to stay in our home in Muskogee. My mother certainly wasn't going to let me go by myself so now we're going to leave. That kept preying on my mind but it was in motion, everything was in motion.

I appeared at our community center for a fundraiser, milk and ice fund, and they had several segments. They had the Bacone Indian Club also on the program. I appeared with them because I was doing Indian themed ballet. I saw the eagle dance and the hoop dance. I knew I had to do them—it came over me as a spiritual thing. I knew I had to learn. My mother began the process of talking with Bacone to try to find out if someone would teach me.

Well, of course, what we did not know, she nor I, [was that] no women had ever done those dances. Period. And I was a Cherokee. We didn't do those dances. Those were not our history, our culture. We did stomp dancing and that was all spiritual and secretive to some degree. In that day it was a little more open.

21:49 Kiowa fancy dancer Jack Anquoe taught Winnie eagle and hoop dances

Finally, through Dick West, he's a renowned artist and he was the director of art [at Bacone College] at that time. She was able to locate and contact Jack Anquoe, pure-blood Kiowa [Plains Indian tribe] and he finally agreed [to teach me.] I believe now he was a college guy that thought, "Well, I'll pick up a couple of dollars here teaching this young lady and she'll never learn it." He disclosed that to me later. But the hoop dance was what I was interested in. I took those lessons in Dick West's studio. Every time I went, which was once a week, I saw Dick West's artwork as it progressed. He would work on it some. Then the following week, I'd be there for my lesson and I'd see those paintings. I got to observe Dick West's artwork as he was producing it. He became a very good friend of our family due to all of this.

Jack [Anquoe] made me promise, before the first lesson, that I would never disclose that he had taught me. He also said, "You may never, ever, perform these in public." I agreed. Because again, it was something that I knew I had to know. I wanted to know it. So I agreed readily. What he didn't realize was that I had been dancing ballet. [I was] highly coordinated for some years then, four or five years. I learned all those dances within the first five or six months.

23:38 Okmulgee powwow was first duo performance of Jack and Winnie

He [Jack] asked my parents if I could travel with him and perform at the Okmulgee powwow. There we are, breaking his own rules. I did not have regalia [dancer's clothing] so my parents got busy, got it all together, borrowed some of it, whatever. We met [Jack] at the Okmulgee powwow. That was the first time I ever danced these dances [in public.]

[Lorretta: What year, do you remember, or about? You were how old?] 1949, about 1949. [Winnie was about twelve.]

Jack was so pleased because they called us specialty dancers in those days at powwows. You have exhibition dancers now, but in those days, they called us specialty dancers. We performed eagle dance and hoop dance. No one, even men were not doing hoop dance. You had very few hoop dancers at all because it was so technical and so specific. Everyone did fancy dancing and war dancing.

[Lorretta: What's the purpose of the hoop dance?] It originates with the New Mexico tribes. It signified a young man going through puberty and becoming a man. The passing-through the hoops was significant of that and so, you see, how that was extremely difficult for a young girl to be performing this dance that held such tradition from time immemorial.

[Lorretta: I assume that as Jack taught you the steps, he told you the meaning of each part?] No, no, not that much. I knew that, I learned that later. Yes, because see, again, I promised to never perform them in public. I also said that I would never tell anyone that he was the one. So we performed there. Suddenly, everyone was saying, "My goodness, we've got hoop dancers again." See, hadn't been done in a long time. Nobody was doing it. Eagle dancers. No. Again, that's the spirituality of getting messages from the Creator, coming down on the wings of the eagle. So, again, these are Plains dances, [and] I'm a Cherokee.

26:01 Jack and Winnie invited to perform at the Anadarko Indian Exposition

We were invited [to the Anadarko Indian Exposition.] Jack's family was so highly regarded. His father [James Asah Aunquoe] sang and wrote a lot of the songs, these old, old songs. He was instrumental in everything that went on at the Anadarko Indian Exposition. Jack got us an invitation to do eagle dance and hoop dance there. That broke the ground, and I will tell you, everyone camped out so my parents and I met Jack. He said, "I'm going to go introduce you to my parents." We had been dancing for a while then so people knew about us, especially his parents. He knew it was not going to bode well. So, we approached their tent, I'll never forget.

His mother [Anna Keahbone Aunquoe] was cooking pork chops for their family of probably thirty-five or something, all in a big, big tent, which is cots, old-fashioned Army cots lined up.

She was tending those pork chops in the largest iron skillet I'd ever seen. She never looked up and she never acknowledged my parents and me.

His dad was seated over talking to some fellows. We went to him and he did look up but they did not acknowledge us. It was probably at least two years before they even spoke with their own son because of this groundbreaking situation. We continued to perform at Anadarko. He and I had so many opportunities and we took all of them. My parents always supported it.

Oh, back to the story. You could see I changed my mind and did not follow that opportunity to dance in New York City and study to be a true ballerina because of this experience that I had, which I am forever grateful for.

28:30 Choice to forego New York City to stay in Oklahoma

[Lorretta: Would you have worked with Yvonne Chouteau herself, or is that a school?] Yes! And I would have been at the school, uh huh. Quite an opportunity and yet I had to weigh all the circumstances. I knew that would not be a good thing for my parents. It would be a good thing for me because it wasn't where I had lived and grown up.

See, I was an only child, as I mentioned earlier. I was at my daddy's elbow all the time, learning and taking things in. I knew all about nature. When we lived in Pryor, we backed up to maybe Pryor Creek, who knows, but a little creek ran through there. We had to walk through a pasture or two and navigate a couple of barbed wire fences. I learned there that you would always throw a couple of pebbles in your front, in your path. You'd scare away any snakes or any critters or anything like that, you know, that would be in your path. We never killed anything in nature, except for food. If we fished, we did not ever catch more than two or three fish cause that's what we could eat for our meal that night. I learned all those things that are still with me today.

[Lorretta: Did Jack teach any males these dances?] Never. Never taught another soul.

[Lorretta: So, he, and you, were the end of the knowledge of those dances?] Of that very dance. People still do them today. Several years ago, I went to a program at the library downtown here in Tulsa and someone there was dancing similar but the song has evolved, it's not the exact same song. The dance, definitely, has evolved.

Now there are competitions, national competitions for dancing. In fact, just two or three years ago, at Native American Day, I actually met one of the young men who had just won the national championship. He was eager to talk with me and to see me. Some of the things that we did that were so ultimately athletic, they don't do today. A lot of what they perform today are making symbols and designs with the hoops. We [Jack and Winnie] danced through them continually, the entire song. We were moving in and out, the hoops were moving in and out, over our bodies, we were moving in and out, jumping through them. It is still, from a stamina point, I would say the hoop dance is very athletic. But it didn't have the athleticism that our performances did.

31:30 Jack performed before Queen, Winnie performed the shield dance

All of this led Jack and myself to have, again, many opportunities. In fact, Jack, while still a student at Bacone, was invited to perform before the Queen of England. Bacone College asked if

I could go [to England] and my parents would not let me go. They felt like I would not have been chaperoned properly. It was going to be about a two-and-a-half-week trip that would have taken me out of school partially. I would have had to miss a little bit of school so I didn't get to go on that trip. Jack did, and it was highly successful.

Jack and I performed at the Bacone basketball games. I'll never forget one night one of the fellows couldn't come. Bill Garcia was sick and he and Jack always did the shield dance. Well, the shield dance is a battle between two warriors. They have their shields and lances. Jack came to me and said, "Winnie, do you think you could do the shield dance?" "Well, I've watched y'all do it and I know it but should I do it?" Jack's about 6'1," and here I am, barely five feet tall. "I don't know, we're liable to get in trouble." He said, "No, Mr. [Dick] West was the director of the Indian club and we had his approval. So, I was actually was in battle with my teacher there at the basketball game. Unbelievable opportunities!

33:07 Performed with Kenneth Anquoe troupe

Jack had an older brother, Kenneth Anquoe, who actually started the Tulsa Powwow. He had a troupe and we would travel to several states. I would always go with them. We did a lot of dancing: scalp dance, buffalo dance, squat dance, ruffle dance, snake dance. We had a whole repertoire of everything we did. What an exciting time for me because I was doing the things that really led me and helped direct me to be the person I am today. It might be hard for others to understand when you have a chance to be a part of history. I didn't know it at the time, it was just what I chose and wanted to do. But it was an expression of creativity, it was expression of your culture and your heritage. It was storytelling. A lifetime story—all of us have one—but where I had been and what I had an opportunity to do, was extremely unique. Even at that time it was being recognized as groundbreaking.

34:36 Finalist in the Miss Indian America pageant, traveled with Chief Keeler

All of this led Marie Wadley, who worked at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Muskogee, to invite me to be named Miss Cherokee. I was to accompany our then Principal Chief W. W. Keeler to Sheridan, Wyoming, for the [1957] All-American Indian Days. Chief Keeler was named the Native American of the Year. They wanted someone to go to participate in the Miss Indian America pageant which was also in conjunction with that event. It was a weeklong event. I'm finding out now even many people continue to say, "Oh, my goodness, that was the biggest gathering of Natives anywhere." My parents agreed and my mother made, with my daddy's assistance to some degree, Cherokee dresses for me to wear. Because it lasted a week, I needed three. We got it all pulled together pretty quickly.

What an amazing trip! I'll never forget. We left the old Tulsa International Airport, maybe not even International at that time, on the Phillips [Petroleum] private plane. I traveled with Judge N. B. Johnson, he was one of the judges of Cherokee Nation, with Earl Boyd Pierce, a Cherokee official counsel who was a friend of my father and I'd known all my life, and Frank Muskrat, who was in charge of public relations at Phillips Petroleum. Of course, I failed to mention W. W. Keeler, our Chief, was the head of Phillips Petroleum at that time. What a trip for me and really Mr. Muskrat was in charge of me.

We arrive and there are about 120 of us participating [in Miss Indian America competition.] Several days have passed, we've had a series of interviews, we've had many things happening and then they [the judges] called me in, singly, only me, and I realized there was some seriousness to the meeting. I'm thinking, "What is going on?" I was in my full dress and everything. We were getting ready to go to a rodeo that day. We were all to appear—all 120-125 of us. I'm singled out and they asked me if I had been told, prior to coming, that I would be named the award winner. I said, "Oh no, no one ever disclosed that." They asked me several other questions and I think they realized that that was not so. I told Mr. Muskrat what had happened. We realized then that because I had traveled with that huge entourage, well, not huge, but several gentlemen. The entourage from Phillips Petroleum was in support of our Principal Chief W. W. Keeler. There could have been some kind of, I don't know, some kind of a thought I was singled out because many times they did not want me with a group [of contestants.] They would have me sit with them. The group would be on one side of the aisle and they would have me sit with them because Mr. Muskrat was so cautious that he took care of me. That's the only thing we could ever figure.

The bottom line is this: Dolores Jean Shorty, an absolutely gorgeous young woman who was Navajo, [was named Miss Indian America.] She had the most beautiful, very simple, dress with a velvet skirt, a velvet top, a squash blossom necklace. She was so strikingly different from the rest of us. She was chosen that year. Something happened and she did not get to participate [serve] so, although I had been named 4th runner up, I became 3rd runner up. What a wonderful, my goodness, time for me! I have all kinds of photographs of that—of me with Chief Keeler and, you know, I've served on the board of the Cherokee National Historical Society as well as the Cherokee National History Museum. They have told me that my collection of photographs of our chief is almost more than what they actually have in the archives. I have a scrapbook full of that trip. Again, another opportunity that just happened—it was because I was the one that was there. It could have been somebody else. But Marie Wadley had known me and watched me grow up in Muskogee, so I got the opportunity.

39:32 Marriage and family legacy

I married [Ronald D. Perdue on November 24, 1961] and raised two daughters [Pamela Musgrove and Melissa Perdue.] I stayed at home the entire time and raised them just as I had been raised. They never did specialty dances but they certainly dance, I'll put it that way. I have two granddaughters [Madison and M'Lynn Musgrove] and they both dance and have regalia to dance.

[Lorretta: How do they learn to dance today? Did you teach them?] It's almost in your nature, it's in your blood. It's there. They've heard the songs always. I've always had tapes in the car and stuff, you know. Interesting enough, they all are singers so it's all very familiar to them. When they were little, my husband worked for Shell Oil and we were transferred to Indianapolis. They have a renown children's museum there. They invited me to dance. They had a gathering of a few Natives but mostly Boy Scouts. Scouting studied Indian lore and dancing, of course. I agreed to go. I was going to do eagle and hoop dances but our oldest daughter, Pam, was about six. She had a dress so she performed the very first time with me there. When she was six she

began to hear those songs. She was inclined that way anyway. Our second daughter was only two years old at that time, so she did not perform but [would] at many church functions.

It's amazing how many people I have an opportunity to speak to, share stories. I'm a storyteller as well, to just recount my own journey because it does have an element of uniqueness. Gilcrease Museum had me speak. They said my story tells a story really of many that is early Indian country. Things that no one knows and are being lost every day. It has had a uniqueness, and my daughters embrace that very much. They continue to dance with me. Both of my granddaughters have embraced that and are highly interested. They want to know all that they can know.

43:00 Trip to Eastern Band Cherokee headquarters in Cherokee, North Carolina

We all four, five of us: two daughters, two granddaughters and myself, traveled last year [2022] to Cherokee, North Carolina. What an opportunity! We were all overwhelmed to be there in our home country. [Lorretta: I bet. I haven't stopped there where it is. But to know that's where you belonged.] Oh my goodness, I had friends I went to school with, as a student at Northeastern in Tahlequah. Two sisters that had traveled [to Oklahoma] from Cherokee [North Carolina.]

We stayed with them [in North Carolina.] They wanted us to come there for years, ever since college days. When I finally got there, I couldn't believe how emotional and powerful the experience was. We stayed a week and I asked to go to their family burial grounds. Just on a mountain, the most gorgeous country you've ever seen. To stand there you were truly overwhelmed with the significance of it. We went to see "Unto These Hills" [outdoor theater show about Eastern Band of Cherokees from first contact with Europeans through the years following the Trail of Tears] which has been performed for sixty to seventy years there [debuted July 1, 1950.] Since I was a child, I'd heard of it. It was the most spiritual experience to stand there on that very ground.

They arranged for our family to meet with the [Principal] Chief. Chief [Richard G.] Sneed was so wonderful to me, to us. He welcomed us to his headquarters. We spent about thirty to forty-five minutes chatting with him. They all, of course, value and treasure the memory of Sequoyah. So many people wanted to meet us and see us. We went to the Cherokee elders' dinner which they provide every day for the elders, probably 125 people there. Some of them came to me. I addressed them briefly and some of them came to me. We realized that our parents, my daddy and their parents, had known each other, either at Sequoyah [Indian Training School] or Haskell Institute. It was that remarkable feeling of "going home."

[Lorretta: To clarify, the Eastern [Band of] Cherokees, did they hide out so they were not removed?] Yes, that's exactly right. My friends, Birdie and Uggs, their parents and all their family had hidden there in the mountains. That's where they have always stayed. That's where they've been all along. Their story is totally remarkable. I could take another hour to tell about them.

45:46 Powerful experience with Eastern Band friends and being on sacred ground

I'll tell you briefly. I said, "I want to see your church. I want to see where you all go to church. I want to see your burial grounds, cemeteries, and all that." Of course, that was emotional for them too, for them to take me there. They shared a story with me. The two sisters are talking, "Oh, Birdie, don't you recall when they were not doing the right things, building the right kinds of things around our church, so we just moved the church." Now think of that. We saw first the location where the building had been standing all of their lives. Then we went up the road about a mile and saw where they had relocated that church building.

You see, the Eastern Band is so small, there's few of them. Fortunately, they now have the casino there on their property and all their original allotments are extremely valuable now. They have all maintained theirs and kept them. Their family [Birdie and Uggs] have been leaders in everything there. Ugg, the older sister, had been instrumental in the veterans' headquarters and a memorial with all the flags – all the state flags, Cherokee flag. Chief Sneed, in our meeting, said, "Your friends are leaders here. They have been instrumental in financially supporting these things as well as doing fundraisers for others. They are highly regarded in this area."

So once again, I just happened to be at Northeastern, we just happened to make friends, they just happened to invite me there. I got to travel there with both my daughters and my granddaughters. I will tell you, it was so significant with my granddaughters. One of them is a graduate of University of Miami and the other, Marymount [Manhattan] College in New York City. All of them are singers and performers and successful young women. We had a rental car—we had flown into Asheville.

When we were leaving, the Oconaluftee River runs right through [Cherokee, North Carolina.] I had continued to think I wanted to go down there and walk in that stream. We had time. We stopped and all took off our shoes and walked in the stream, holding hands together. You know, life brings many powerful moments and I have experienced so many of them. My opportunities have been so great. I'm grateful for every bit of that. But that day I was grateful to the Creator for bringing me to that spot. Giving my children and my grandchildren an opportunity to experience something that we didn't dream would be such a powerful thing.

49:35 Recipient of honor and recognition for service to the Cherokee Nation

So, here we are, the Cherokee Nation. I have served them and been an ambassador my whole life. I've known every chief. They named me one of five women that changed the Cherokee world. Along with our Chief Wilma Mankiller, the first female chief of a major Indian nation—a wonderful, successful person. [Chief] Ross Swimmer is my friend. [Chief] W. W. Keeler was my friend.

To be recognized as having experienced true history. I now value so highly. I didn't know it at the time. I was just living my life. And to be recognized by my nation as an honored elder. I'm a board member emeritus of the Cherokee [National] Historical Society board. Also, Cherokee [National] History Museum. And right now, I just got new information at the Cherokee Holiday this past weekend that we are building [in the future.] They're going to surpass everything.

51:16 Cherokee Nation board meeting in 2023, Tulsa Powwow memories

I was at that final board meeting at the Cherokee Nation, just about six weeks ago, and they asked me to speak a final thought. We, as Cherokee people, have always risen to the occasion. We are 400,000 strong at this time. Honorable people. Honor our elders. There is no place I go that people are not honoring me, helping me, and it's very moving.

At the Tulsa Powwow about four years ago a man, probably about seventy, came up to me and said, "Are you Winnie Guess?" "I am." "Well, I'm Sonny Supernaw, we used to dance together." I was quite a bit older than he was at the time, he was just a little boy. "[Winnie] would you come over here? I want you to meet my family." I said of course I would. I did remember him, he was probably about six or seven [years old.] We went over [to his family's area.] Of course, at powwows all the families sit together. Sometimes there could be a large family and [they had] thirty-five to forty in that section, in lawn chairs. After he said my name, he said [to his clan], "I want you to stand." His whole family stood and they recognized me [a sign of respect] as being groundbreaking dancer at the Tulsa Powwow.

I was interviewed on television about the Tulsa Powwow in 2023. [Winnie was at the first Tulsa Powwow in 1952 – she and Jack performed. 2023 was the 71st anniversary of the annual event.] The interviewer asked, "How do you feel being here? You were at the very first one. Probably one of the last ones that was there." Yes, the Tulsa Powwow organization recognized me as "last living" [person to attend the 1952 powwow.]

It's so very powerful and moving and it brought to me a celebration in my heart. But it also brought to me many nostalgic memories of all those who have gone before me. See, I sat with the Anquoe family. There were many Anquoe brothers and sisters. Well, they are all gone. They were my peers. They're all gone. I'm the last living. All the younger people would come up to me and I'd say, "Who are you?" [wanting to know name of Anquoe parent] They'd say, "I wasn't born, but I just wanted to come see you and talk to you." What an ultimate honor.

53:51 Reflecting on her life's journey: walking in two worlds as her father predicted

I'm very grateful to my parents who raised me in the fashion that they did, always high expectations, with the bar set extremely high. I have walked in two worlds my entire life. My parents were instrumental in all of this and keeping me on a path.

My daddy and I would cook frog legs that we had caught earlier in the day in our backyard. I was the head cheerleader of our school, Muskogee Central High, and yet, that evening I was in my backyard cooking those frog legs. I'm still walking in two worlds.

So, I would tell you, my journey has been unique in so many ways and has afforded me opportunity after opportunity. The things that would come my way, I had the support of so many who gave me moral support. There was never a task that I thought I couldn't manage.

56:39 Activities and interests in latter part of life

I have to tell you that I was always an athlete. I traveled to the Senior Olympic Games and participated in the actual Olympic stadium. I competed in race walk. What a wonderful

experience is that! I was named in 2004 the Oklahoma Senior Athlete of the Year because I had been so successful in race walk and leg press. All of that I attribute to dancing and having that skill. I maintained good health practices which were my parents' long suit, believe me. So, all of those things were something that was my way of life.

I have many elementary school friends and we're all still friends, the majority of them. Again, from Muskogee, Indian or Cherokee, and many times, when we get together, they will say, "We didn't know you were doing all that." But walking in two worlds, I lived two different things, in going to perform Native dances, my culture, clearly understanding Cherokee heritage. But it didn't come up in natural conversation [with friends.] They're amazed by what they are reading or seeing about me, "How could you have been doing all of that yet be a school leader?" Being so very active in school life, you know.

[Winnie and Ronald Perdue celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on November 24, 2011. An article in the *Tulsa World* includes a wedding photograph. She worked at Oral Roberts University for twenty-eight years as the coordinator of alumni events and programs, retiring in 2010.]

I've always done a lot of volunteer work. I was a [member of the] Gillies [volunteer organization] at Gilcrease Museum until we closed to start the new museum. I had a wonderful day there once telling my journey. Everyone stood in recognition to just hear the story from that dust rising from a gravel road when my daddy was a child that did not speak English and was to be carted away the following morning to be educated and live his early life in an orphanage. And then become a translator for the BIA. With my schoolteacher mother, he led me on a path to set me on a journey that would be considered unique and certainly, to me, so rewarding.

I mentioned traveling with University of Oklahoma [staff] to do the documentary "Searching for Sequoyah."

I also played a role in a movie the Cherokee Nation produced titled "Nanyehi: The Story of Nancy Ward." She was a beloved woman of the Cherokee Nation. I thought, "I need to do this." And I won the audition to play the elder version of her in the film [2016.] The movie of that same name is being seen everywhere; [it's] been on national television.

As a result of that, there is a stage play they're producing at the Hard Rock [Hotel and Casino in Catoosa] that the Cherokee Nation supports. They have the original actress portraying Nanyehi. They asked me to play the elder version of her. "Only if I have to memorize a [small] bit." Of course, once I agreed, then I got my script and I had to memorize a whole lot! I almost turned in the towel after about the first month but I've never quit on anything so I looked to my parents and thought, "No, no, no, you must do this." So, I learned it and did a good enough job that they invited me back and we start rehearsals this next Monday. So, I'll be portraying elderly Nanyehi in that theatrical production at the Hard Rock again.

All of these things continue to come to me and I have that warrior's mentality. You know, doing those dances that traditionally had always been done by men. I had that in my heart and I knew

that I could meet any challenge. And that, too, has directed my life. And it has all served me very well.

So, here I am, Winnie May Guess Perdue, Cherokee citizen.