

Before GPS: Cherokee Indian Trail Trees

By Laurie Flanagan

Hey, Siri. Give me directions to the nearest watering hole.



Figure 1A Cherokee Indian Trail Tree on North Flagship Drive in the Keowee Key community in Salem, SC points E-NE (70°) to Keowee Town, a Cherokee Indian town now submerged under the waters of Lake Keowee.

In today's world, when we ask that question, Siri routes us step by step to the nearest bar and grill, or "watering hole." But more than 400 years ago, Cherokee Indians with the very same question had to depend on Trail Trees to direct them to the nearest waterhole for their thirsty animals.

Former Lake and Hills Garden Club President Fredi Hallman and her husband, Harvey, spent years researching Trail Trees and compiled their results in their booklet, Cherokee Indian Trail Trees of the Keowee Peninsula. Cherokee Indians deliberately bent young saplings, often white oak, to point in the direction of water sources, medicinal plants, special burial sites, safe-crossing points at rivers, and trails. Long before GPS, Trail Trees guided the Cherokee Indians step by step.

According to the Hallmans, Cherokee Indians bent saplings as close to a right angle as possible in the direction of the desired location. They propped up the bend with a crutch made from another tree to form a "hip." Then, several feet from the prop or crutch, they made another bend upwards by tying the sapling down to the ground with leather straps, creating a "knee." Often, the Cherokee Indians created a distinctive "nose" or knob on the knee as they cut into the tree to ensure the bend. These "bending tools," which stunted the growth of the tree, were left in place for several years until the tree grew to the desired shape. The Cherokee Indians planted the Trail Trees about 100 yards apart. With the aid of a Trail Tree expert, the Hallmans identified over 50 Trail Trees in the Lake Keowee area. In fact, Trail Trees can be spotted all over the continental United States.

So how do you know if one of those funny bent trees in your yard is really a Trail Tree or just an act of nature? The Hallmans provide the following Trail Tree characteristics:



Figure 2 Fredi Hallman identifies a newly discovered Cherokee Indian Trail Tree in a neighbor's backyard in the Keowee Key community in Salem, SC.

- **The base leg of the Trail Tree should be at least 12 inches in diameter.** Because age tests are not performed on many trees, the diameter of the base leg of the tree must be at least twelve inches in order for it to have been created by the Cherokee Indians.
- **The nose or knee should be less than 8 feet off the ground.** Since the Cherokee Indians did not have horses until about 1800, the nose or knee must be less than eight feet off the ground.
- **Tie-down marks at the nose or knee are visible.** Lines created by the leather straps to tie Trail Trees down are often still evident.

Preservation of Trail Trees, identified by historical markers, is key. Long before America's European colonization, these trees played an important role in America as "GPS coordinates." Today, Trail Trees continue to communicate important messages to 21st century Americans about the Cherokee Indians' way of life and culture.

For more information about Cherokee Trail Trees, please contact Fredi Hallman at fnhallman@bellsouth.net.