

## ITI FABVSSA

**By Jennifer Byram**  
**Choctaw Nation**

Have you heard about the National Bison Legacy Act? In April the House and Senate of the US Congress passed the act, making the bison the national mammal. In honor of this great news, this month we are featuring an indigenous textile made of bison hair. On display in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England is a large bison wool bag, which probably dates back to the 1700s, and just might have been made by a Choctaw person. As a master's student of the University of Oxford, the writer of this article was able to visit with the bag on two separate occasions in order to tell its story. The piece is fragile but full of traditional knowledge and artistry. The writer is a Choctaw tribal member and a textile maker. Seeing the bag on these occasions was a humbling experience. Even 300 years later, the weaver's ingenuity and dedication to her work shines through her textile. In studying the bag, the writer was able to witness the hours the weaver spent laboring over the piece and see how her imagination came to life in the bag. The weaver gained her knowledge and skill watching and learning from the tribe's mothers and spending countless hours perfecting her own craft.

During its 300 year lifetime, her bag has traveled far and no doubt seen many remarkable places and people. Somehow the bag changed hands from the weaver and tribe, its home, to a European living, traveling or working in North America. Eventually it landed in the collection of an English man, General Pitt Rivers, who then donated his works to the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford. What a journey this bag made! Today it lies among other textiles and creations from around the world and is marveled at by many British people and visitors from every corner of the earth. Among scholars and museum workers, the piece has become quite well known as a rare and outstanding work. The bag has some holes and decay yet its excellent quality and tight weave have kept it in remarkable condition for its age. The bag contains much from which we can learn.

The bag was made using bison hair, another wooly fiber, and white trade beads. It is a flat, large woven bag, measuring 18 in. wide by 9 1/4 in. tall plus 5 in. long fringe on average. Unfortunately, little is known of the specific traditional preparation of bison hair. Deerskin trader James Adair of Ireland wrote in 1775 that "In the winter season, the women gather buffalo's hair, a sort of coarse brown curled wool; and having spun it as fine as they can, and properly doubled it, they put small beads of different colours upon the yarn, as they work it: the figures they work in those small webs, are generally uniform, but sometimes they diversify them on both sides. The Choktah weave shot-pouches, which have raised work inside and outside."

Bison hair must be collected as the bison sheds and these pieces are often knotted and unusable. The bison have five varieties of hair ranging from the short, soft undercoat to the long, coarse guard hairs. Once clumps of hair are collected, these five varieties of bison hair must be laboriously prepared and sorted. Today usually only the undercoat is used to spin

luxurious, soft yarns. However, the fiber used to weave the bag was likely the bison's longer, guard hair which causes the fabric and fringe to appear coarse and rope-like.

In order to create the yarn, the fiber is spun using a tool called a spindle. James Adair also described how "the old women spin [fiber] off the distaffs, with wooden machines, having some clay on the middle of them, to hasten the motion" (1775). Choctaws would have used spindles similar in form to those pictured in Figure 2. Using a spindle, the woman making the bag spun the bison hair into fine, two ply yarn. The resulting fabric woven from the yarn is dense yet thin. The bag was woven with a technique called oblique weaving or oblique interlacing (it sometimes falls under the sprang textile category). The weave of this bag is called oblique to refer to its diagonal warp (Figure 3). It requires no tools except two suspended sticks or tautly pulled strings from which the warp hangs.

The bag's beaded designs seem to tell us of a dance or of a meeting while the more abstract lines could be interpreted a number of ways. Although other similarly woven, beaded bags exist, this bag has an exceptional and rare design. A bison hair bag would surely have been a large part of the everyday life of the weaver as she made it. The fact that it was constructed after the maker had access to traded European goods suggests it may be a very special creation for which she chose to set aside extraordinary time and effort.

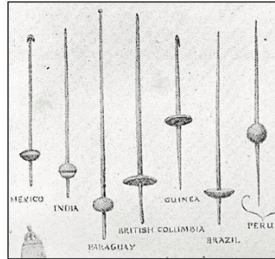
In order to better understand the thought process of this woman, the writer attempted to learn finger weaving and oblique weaving as well. The more the writer wove, the more she came to understand the knowledge and artistry of the weaver. This woman planned the design out by stringing beads on the warp in the right order. At the beginning of the piece, the weaver grouped the warp threads into bundles which she braided. In an unusual fashion these braids were neatly combined to form the top edge of the fabric. She guided her beaded warp threads to create the designs on the bag. She used every trade bead she had, even the ones with imperfections. Her lines and stripes gave way to images of people built bead by bead. She had to concentrate carefully in weaving the neck, shoulders, waist, legs, and feet as these all ran contrary to the angled direction of the warp. Having masterfully completed her beaded people and designs, the weaver would have had to finish the other panels and assemble the parts of the bag. Her sewing is incredibly neat and regular so much so that the writer was first tricked into thinking the bag had actually been woven as a tube. Rather, the weaver artfully seamed the bag together, even beading one seam as she sewed. Finally, with the ends of the parts of the bag still loose, she bundled and braided the warps of the panels together for about an inch and left the rest as fringe. While the weaver's experience likely made the process quicker than the writer's inexperienced attempts at oblique weave, it would have still demanded a considerable amount of the weaver's time.

Early native pieces like the bison hair bag that use both native and non-native materials (beads and commercial wool) demonstrate high levels of innovation and adaptability. Unfortunately very few pieces made of bison hair still exist today. These fine yet fragile pieces usually did not survive long in the humid environment of the North American southeast. However, finger weaving can be learned and, in turn, Choctaw textiles can be a living tradition again with the

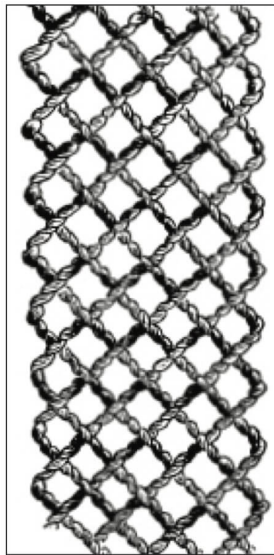
interest of its people and new generations of weavers. The writer found that learning oblique weaving provided a meaningful connection to her ancestry and forged a stronger link between her current and future textile work and the textile work of her ancestors. The bison hair bag carries traditional knowledge and artistry waiting for us as the Choctaw people to weave these elements together yet again.



**Fig. 1: 1884.69.15, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, U.K., Writer's own photograph**



**Fig. 2: Image from "Smithsonian Report," Luther Hooper, 1914**



**Fig. 3: Image from Pre-historic Plies: a Structural and Comparative Analysis of Cordage, Netting, Basketry, and Fabric from Ozark Bluff Shelters, Sandra C. Scholtz, 1975**