

**Whistle-Making Time Near
(John Parris, *Mountain Bred*)**

Birdtown

Little boys, the kind with warts and day dreams, are itching to get out of their long underwear and go barefooted and catch frogs and minnows and tadpoles.

For days now they have been keeping one eye on the willows and the other on the elderberry bushes, waiting for the sap to be just right for making a willow whistle or an elderberry popgun.

To many a little boy there's something about a willow whistle or an elderberry popgun that no store-bought toy can ever match.

This is especially true if his grandfather does the whittling and talks man-talk to him while he works with his Barlow knife.

As primitive toys, the willow whistle and the elderberry popgun were prized playthings among Cherokee children long before the white man came this way.

After the American wilderness had been tamed, the little Indian boys taught many a settler's son how to make willow whistles and elderberry popguns.

They made the whistles by beating a piece of willow stick to loosen the bark. The bark was slipped off and then a wooden stem was carved. The perforated bark was replaced over the stem.

The popgun, which the Cherokee called shenla-yohido, meaning "has a hole in it," was fashioned from a straight tube of elderberry. Sometimes shumac, mulberry or river cane also was used.

A plunger of hardwood was fitted loosely to the opening. A cud of chewed wet leaves was packed tightly into each end of the tube.

To shoot the popgun, one wad was pushed forward quickly by the plunger, compressing the air in the tube and forcing out the other wad with a loud pop.

The Cherokee had quite a few unique toys.

One was called a "buzzer." This was made up of a notched disc carved from some soft wood or gourd. A loop of string passed through two holes near the center. Spun between the hands by tension on the twisted string, it produced a buzzing sound.

The "roarer" was a typical bull-roarer, fashioned from a narrow length of poplar and fastened to a long string by a hole at one end.

Swung rapidly in circles around the head, the edges of the spinning board were designed so they would produce a deep, roaring note.

In the old days, Cherokee children's toys included miniatures of such adult tools as bows, blowguns, mortars and pestles, baskets, and ball-sticks.

Sleds, for example, even in recent years, were copies of the heavy sledges used with oxen for work in the woods.

Such toy sleds were used for hauling loads and for sledding down a slippery mud-covered slope in wet weather.

The Cherokee child of the last century also played with several toy weapons. Some of them were quite respectable hunting tools.

Guns were rare and aboriginal hunting devices were of major importance until very recent times.

Bows and arrows were smaller copies of adult weapons. And the child's blowgun differed from the adult's only in being of shorter length.

There was a time too when Cherokee children used the crossbow in hunting small game, but this toy weapon was undoubtedly of European origin.

Cherokee boys had a sling, made of two leather thongs and a leather pouch. Although a vicious implement, it seems never to have been used for any worthwhile purpose.

The "fly-gun" was an unusual miniature spring-gun.

It was used by small children in hunting insects, especially horse-flies, as a sport.

A joint of river cane was cut out to form a tube, open at one end. A hole was bored through the tube at the closed end and a slender rod of seasoned hickory, rectangular in cross-section, was fitted tightly through these, so that it was perpendicular to the axis of the tube.

The hickory spring was bent in an arc and the end thrust through slots near the open end of the tube.

The bottom slot, which held the tip, was shorter and did not extend as far toward the open end as the top slot.

The end of the hickory was forced through both slots. A short length of willow twig was dropped down the tube to rest against it and the open end was aimed.

The end of the spring was pushed up with the finger, so that it was released from the lower slot, and the straightening hickory spring shot the twig out of the gun with considerable velocity.

In earlier times, this was the Cherokee child's first introduction to projectile weapons and the beginning of his long training in their use.

Most of the unique playthings of an earlier period have disappeared.

But the willow whistle and the elderberry popgun are still around.