# Jay Hannah

Cherokee Statesman, Banker & Historian

**Chapter 1 – Introduction**

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**Announcer:** A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Jay Hannah served as the Nation's Secretary-Treasurer and as Chairman of the Nation's 1999 Constitution convention.

As Board Chairman of Cherokee Nation Business, Jay directed the Nation's holding company for all enterprise operations. He Co-Chaired the Nation's Private Industry Council with Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller.

A community banker for over 40 years in Oklahoma, Jay has served as bank president in the communities of Guthrie and Tahlequah. As head of Financial Services for BankFirst, Jay supervises a wide range of profit centers and support units. He is a frequent lecturer at a variety of schools offered by the Oklahoma Bankers Association.

In Jay's oral history, you will encounter a history lesson of the Cherokees as it relates to the state of Oklahoma, on the podcast and oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

**Chapter 2 – 12:56**
**Moseley's Prairie**

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**John Erling (JE):** Well, my name is John Erling, and today's date is April 23rd, 2025. So Jay, would you give us your full name, please?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Yes, [name spoken in Cherokee language]. In Cherokee it means "my name is Jay Hannah." My first name is Dennis, although I'm not allowed to use that name because it's been passed on in my family to others that are more worthy. Dennis—yeah, so named for Chief Dennis Bushyhead of the Cherokees, and therefore the eldest Dennis gets to be Dennis, and we've had a Dennis in our family since the 1890s.

**JE:** But why can't you have several Dennises?

**JH:** It's because a name is a sacred thing and it only belongs to one person. So my father, Dennis Charles Hannah, when he passed away in 2005, the family came at his honoring and passed his name to me. But my nephew, Roger Dennis Eller, a captain in the 509th Regiment of the Airborne attached to 10th Mountain Division, had just returned from Iraq on an 18-month combat tour. I said no, he is a warrior, [word spoken in Cherokee language]. “He will be known as Dennis.” And he has gotten his life back under control since combat, and he now has an Ed.D. and he's a principal of a school in Tacoma, Washington, and he is Doctor Dennis Eller.

**JE:** And so you're no longer Dennis.

**JH:** It's just something on my driver's license. I am [word spoken in Cherokee language]. I am “Jay.”

**JE:** Your birth date.

**JH:** July 12th of 1955. You know, the date is the same one as the birth date of Julius Caesar. It's why I always sit with my back to the wall when I'm in rooms, and I look at my friends with a casting eye. And of course you'll remember 1955 was the last year that the Brooklyn Dodgers beat the Yankees.

**JE:** It was the only year. Well, the Dodgers beat—

**JH:** We like to say that, you know, being a Dodgers fan, even though they've moved out west, I still believe in them.

**JE:** And I was a Dodger fan myself. And Brooklyn Dodgers, right? Your present age is—

**JH:** I am 69 years old, and if I can live till July, I'll hit the 7-0 mark.

**JE:** Sounds like you're probably going to do that. Where were you born?

**JH:** I was born in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, which is odd since my mother's people are Arkansans. It is on the border of the Cherokee Nation in the state of Arkansas. Since it was July, there was a threshing going on, and I was only the second person in my family to be born in a hospital. Allegedly, my granny told my mother when it was time for my delivery, she said, "Bobbie, we're busy cooking for the hired hands in the kitchen. We don't have time for a baby birthing. You'll have to go into town." So I was born at

the Siloam Springs Memorial Hospital, which was the old Chautauqua grounds in Siloam.

**JE:** We're gonna have to go back here, because when you said "threshing," I know what that means. You tell the folk who are listening what threshing meant.

**JH:** Well, you know, farming—it would speak out of date, but we'll say farming 100 years ago or 150 years ago was not quite as technologically driven as it is today when we see tractors that are driven by GPS sensors that are directed by satellites. So raw horsepower oftentimes came from either steam tractors or from old gasoline tractors that had bull wheels, which then powered other types of farming devices.

And threshing machines—usually in my part of the country, you didn't really own one. You had to borrow one from your wealthier neighbors. And if you raised 20 acres of oats, you'd cut those oats and maybe your neighbor would let you borrow their threshing machine, which stood individually and was run by another tractor with a bull belt. And you forked all of that, and it maneuvered through with a lot of dust and a lot of noise, and you didn't want to get too close because it would suck you in.

**JE:** Then it separated the chaff from the wheat.

**JH:** It did. It did. And so in many ways, the technology of the era was almost as complicated as it is today as we sit here looking at all this electronic equipment. It was just in a more analog format.

**JE:** If you were born in Siloam Springs, where did you grow up?

**JH:** I grew up in Adair County, which is in the Cherokee Nation. I'm descended from the Adairs—the Adair being a good Scottish name, much like Hannah. These were intermarried Scottish traders among the Cherokees in the 1700s. I like to think that my great-great grannies were fetching girls, but when Scottish traders made their way into a place that Cherokees pronounced as "Ten-ah-see," not "Tennessee," they discovered that they needed a crown warrant to trade with the Cherokees.

Because the British, during our colonial years, they wanted their taxes, and that's the best way to keep up with taxation: that the only people who can trade with Indians are those who actually have a license to do so. My early

Scottish grandfathers who intermarried among the Cherokees recognized the clan structure of the Cherokee Nation. We have seven clans in the Cherokee Nation, and your clan membership comes from your mother's side of the family—because as my granny always said, "You always know who your mother is. Your father could be suspect."

And out of that, I like to think that, well, they understood. And my early Cherokee grannies were fetching girls -- [Cherokee word] as it's said in the language, but the fact is it was probably a good business deal. Because you can either trade with the Cherokees or you can intermarry, Mr. Erling. And you'll have friends and family for life.

**JE:** So where does Moseley Prairie come in on this?

**JH:** Because that's where I was raised. It is a small community that was actually settled by the Old Settlers. So these are early Cherokees that came to Arkansas in the 1820s. Everyone thinks that the Cherokee removal was just a bunch of Cherokee tribal Indians that had been removed by Andrew Jackson, and they made their way here in one large group. And the fact is there were many different factions early on.

As early as 1819, the Hiwassee Purchase group said, "We see the handwriting on the wall. We will agree to move west." A group often referred to in our tribe as the Old Settlers had moved into Arkansas between the Arkansas River and the White River. My wife, who is from Tahlequah, is descended from Old Settlers—early Cherokees who befriended people like Sam Houston, who lived among the Cherokees for about a three-year period before going off to a place called Texas to win their independence and become their president.

And so back to Moseley's Prairie. When Arkansas was becoming a state in 1836, as oftentimes is the case in a predominantly white administration, "Well, we can't have these Indians here," even though many of them looked just like me. They were light-skinned, pant-wearing, well-educated Indians—but still they were Indians. So the Old Settlers were moved into what is now northeastern Oklahoma, the Lovelace Purchase area. Oddly enough, there was an intermarried white by the name of John Moseley, who settled on what is today known as Moseley's — possessive "S" — Prairie.

Turned out he was a horse thief though, and he was run out of the area. He was run off somewhere probably around 1835, and I've always found it fascinating that the geographic name of this community has stayed intact since the 1830s—named for a man who had no ethics.

**JE:** But didn't you work real hard to put Moseley Prairie on the map?

**JH:** I did. Because, you know, first of all, you'd have to describe Moseley. We have one 8th grade school, we have two Baptist churches—there's a Southern and a Missionary Baptist Church—and right in between them, it used to be Rod's Shake and City beer joint on Highway 33. And I'm told that the congregations of all three of those institutions kind of floated back and forth during the week.

I'm in that—growing up on an Indian allotment farm north of the Illinois River. And our mailbox of our family farm was in Delaware County, but the farm was in Adair County. People would ask me where I'm from, and our mailing address during the 1960s was Siloam Springs, Arkansas. And even though my mother's people are white folk from Arkansas, you don't—if you live in Oklahoma, you want to be from Oklahoma.

And I was bussed before it was socially fashionable. I was the first one on, the last one off the bus to go to school in Watts, which was kind of a rough railroad town. It was actually south of the river. So I lived in this nowhere, no-man's-land. And people would say, "Where are you from?" So at an early age for sixth-grade Oklahoma history class, I decided to find out why this area was called Moseley's Prairie. And that's where I discovered the Old Settlers and the intermarried white John Moseley and his story. And I thought, well, maybe we were on the map at one time.

I had to go all the way to Northeastern State College in Tahlequah, as it was called, and went to the library. A lady there helped me to find a 1905 map—pre-statehood—and there in a little circle, it said Moseley's Prairie. I later discovered that we had a post office in Moseley and that there had been a downtown that had almost three buildings in it. We lost our post office in 1921 and it's kind of been on the downhill drag since then. But I thought, as kind of a lark, I might get it back on the state map again.

So I called the state topographical engineer with the Oklahoma

Transportation Department. I said, "How do you get on the map?" And he said, "Well, where do you want to get on there?" And I said, "How about my hometown of Moseley's Prairie?" And when I told him where it was, he looked it up and said, "I don't think we have enough room to get 'Prairie' on there. Will you settle for Moseley?" And I said, "Well, that was actually the name of the post office. That'd be great."

And then you, John, you know how maps work—there are letters across the top and numbers down the side and you look in the key and it says Moseley is at P2. And sure enough, it was. So in 1985, I got a whole box of state maps and started autographing them and handing them out back home. People were tickled. I suddenly became a favorite son back home.

And on top of that, I got a phone call not long after the map came out from the governor's office. George Nigh was the governor at that time, and they said, "We understand you got your hometown on the map." I said, "Yes." They said, "Would you like highway signs?" And I thought, well, they'll probably have to be on the same post. And they said, "Well, that's OK."

So they actually put up highway signs on Highway 33—aka 412 today, the Cherokee Turnpike—and it just said Moseley on it. And of course, the real story is that the handler for Governor Nigh said, "Would you like those signs, you know, like a dedication ceremony?" I said, "That'd be fabulous." He said, "Can you round up some people and we'll have the governor come."

So I called my parents, and they called some neighbors, and I drove back home. And there we were standing on the side of the road on Highway 33, aka Highway 412, and they had gunnysacks—burlap bags—over the signs. There was going to be a revealing of this.

We're standing there for about 45 minutes and we look up the road, and from the west comes a long black Lincoln Continental. It pulls to a screeching halt, and Governor Nigh steps out of the back and raising his hands as though he were Moses, he said, "People of Moseley, it is I, Governor Nigh. I'm here for your dedication. You know, I was born not far from here."

Now I later learned that no matter where Governor Nigh was, he could have been in the Panhandle, and he was always "born not far from here." And of course, the governor is still very much alive and I see him often and remind him of that day. He had the highway patrolman that was driving his car yank the gunnysacks off of the signs, and we all applauded. They got in the car and drove away, and it was less than 60 seconds on the side of Highway 33.

**JE:** That is so great. And of course, I've interviewed George Nigh for our VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

**Chapter 3 – 7:30**
**Family Stories**

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**John Erling (JE):** Your mother's name. I gotta go back and compliment you. You were in the sixth grade when this became of interest to you?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Well, because I was in an Oklahoma history class, and of course I'm going to school in Watts, Oklahoma, where my grandfather drove me down from his old dilapidated house to tell me about Fort Wayne. And I said, "Granddad, what's Fort Wayne?" He said, "Oh, it's one of the first forts in Oklahoma, built in the 1830s." He said, "Matter of fact, Daniel Boone's son came here with the United States Army and they built this fort to protect the Cherokees that were being moved here." And he said, "It stood right here in Mr. Wilson's field."

And there were people that would turn up all sorts of artifacts, which I was fascinated with. You know, here's a bullet or part of a buckle from the 1830s, and it's right here in the very town where I was going to school. So as I made my way into sixth grade—which was required in the 1960s to take Oklahoma history class—it was just... it was all fascinating because it was relevant.

Now that pesky land run out in Oklahoma—I mean, that was like... that may as well have been studying the Pleiades. That was just in another

constellation somewhere. But Cherokee removal, early forts, Civil War battles—I mean, all sorts of things that were right there in my Oklahoma.

**JE:** You were saying the land run was not of interest to you?

**JH:** It was of no interest. As a matter of fact, I had never been further west than probably Muskogee, Oklahoma at that age.

**JE:** Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she was born?

**JH:** Yeah. Bobbie Lee Jones. She was born in Pryor Creek near Chimney Rock Hollow. Her parents—my grandfather, after World War I, took his mustering out pay in 1918 along with his brother Dan, who was born nine months and ten minutes after him. They took their mustering pay and they bought 21 teams of Belgian draft horses, and they went in from northwest Arkansas. They trucked them to a place called the Burbank oil field in the early 1920s because they knew there was work there. They knew how to work horses.

And in those days, if you were going to drill oil wells out in the field, you needed horses to be able to take steam engines or other platform drilling devices to drill those wells. And they—John, they made a ton of money during the 1920s. My grandmother said in 1926 they bought a Model T ton truck. They followed the play throughout Oklahoma through the 1920s until the slump came in 1926—not the Depression, but the slump. It's when the Seminole field came in in '26. It produced so much oil that it depressed the price of oil per barrel internationally.

And my grandfather's company, which was an oil field servicing company, had a contract with Magnolia Petroleum Company—Big Maggie, as he called her. And in their contracts, they had the ability to conclude their contracts at any time. Our family had to sell everything to return to Pryor Creek.

**JE:** Well, I've never heard of this. I've never heard of this slump before, so that's interesting.

**JH:** Oh yeah. Millions of barrels.

**JE:** So then, you're back to your mother. What was she like? Describe her personality.

**JH:** Oh, she was very much the combination of my maternal grandparents. My grandfather Jones was just a character. He had a great sense of humor. He had a great interest in history. His grandfather had fought in the Mexican War. He had all sorts of stories growing up near Highfill, Arkansas.

My grandmother was a Birch. She provided me with a real interest in history because her grandfather did not pass away until she was nine years old. He had fought with the 18th Missouri Infantry for the Confederacy during the Civil War and fought in places like Chickamauga and all those large battles in the East. So, as a child interested in history, I thought I have almost a first-person connection with people who were actually there.

My mother was a phenomenal combination of those two people. She had an appreciation for her family. She had an appreciation for our ancestry. And she was a hard worker. She was a woman who introduced poultry operations to northwest Arkansas when in 1954 she contracted with the Charlie George Poultry Company in Springdale, Arkansas, and borrowed money and built two brooding houses that were 100 feet long. It had almost 2,500 chickens in it.

As a child, I stayed mesmerized by her vaccinating, feeding, watering those chickens. Of course, when the chicken catchers came, that was interesting. And she always kept back about 15 or 20 hens for herself, which we slaughtered and put in the deep freeze. Mom was a hard worker.

**JE:** She was a businesswoman.

**JH:** She was a businesswoman. And she and my father together—they were business people.

**JE:** All right, so then your father's name?

**JH:** Dennis Charles Hannah, citizen of the Cherokee Nation, one-quarter by blood. Born east of Stilwell in Adair County, within spitting distance of where his mother's family—the Starrs—his mother was Gataya Starr, means "cherry." And the Starr family is very prominent in the Cherokee Nation. My father was born in a log cabin house that was within probably 100 yards of where his great-great-great-grandparents ended their journey on the Trail of Tears.

**JE:** And then his personality—was he the same as your mother's, or was he…? And what did you draw from him?

**JH:** Uniquely different in the fact that he was raised during the 1920s and into the Depression era, but in a little bit different type of economic condition. My mother's people were hardworking farmers. I mean, she knew how to keep a garden, she knew how to hunt, she knew how to fish, she knew how to do those things.

My father's father, William Thomas Hannah—he had been drafted during World War I, served with the 90th Division. And oddly enough, his company—they were all mostly Cherokees. They all came from Adair County. The 90th was a draft division, and he arrived in France in June of 1918. His first big engagement was, unfortunately, at the Saint-Mihiel Salient battle in September of 1918. And in the opening days of that battle, he was severely wounded by shrapnel. We still have one piece of almost five that were removed from his back. His doctor gave it to him and said, "You should put this on your watch fob later in life."

## Chapter 4 – 11:36
## Floyd and Starr

**Jay Hannah (JH):** When he came home, he was physically unable to do farming, so he got a barber's license and had a barbershop in Stilwell. He cut the hair of a fellow by the name of Pretty Boy Floyd who, according to my grandfather, was not robbing banks at the time, but he may have been transporting illegal liquor.

My grandparents actually attended Pretty Boy Floyd's funeral at Aiken Cemetery. He said it was kind of a—almost a carnival atmosphere.

**John Erling (JE):** Was it was well-attended?

**JH:** Oh, there were thousands of people there, and it was an open-casket funeral, and people stood in line to go by and see Pretty Boy Floyd. Granddad said it was almost like a picnic—that people brought food and quilts and put them on the ground until it was their turn to go by. And by

the time he got there, he said Pretty Boy was almost snatched bald. People would reach in the casket and take buttons off his shirt. He said finally they had to get family members with shotguns to stand at the corners of his casket to keep people from just practically, you know, unclothing him there. And if you go to Aiken Cemetery today, it's over in Sequoyah County—he's on his third headstone, because people will go there and chip away and take a little souvenir of Pretty Boy Floyd.

**JE:** There's a phenomenon going on here because criminals, robbers, whatever, were celebrated.

**JH:** They were. And oddly enough, we're kind of seeing a return to that.

**JE:** We have seen that.

**JH:** I find that disturbing.

**JE:** Right. It's very disturbing. And that Pretty Boy Floyd—they applauded when he got away.

**JH:** There was this strange concept in the late 19th century—whether it was the James Gang or the Daltons or Pretty Boy Floyd or some of these other evil people—that somehow ordinary common folk were cheering them on. Maybe it was the socioeconomic gap between the wealthy and the elite and those that were struggling.

**JE:** So he was stealing from the rich.

**JH:** Allegedly giving to the poor. But I really don't think there was much going on the poor side.

Now, I would tell you that my grandfather was a—he was a great musician. He was a reader, he was a writer. He could—his Cherokee was good. He could speak, he could write in Cherokee. I credit him with my Cherokee language.

When I was about seven or eight years old, I was visiting him in his little—not-so-good abode. He lived in Watts and he had a little garden out back. And I said, "Granddad, there is a rabbit in your garden. He's gonna eat your lettuce." And he removed his pipe from his mouth. He said, "Well, he's not gonna eat that much. We'll just leave him there." And he said, "Besides,

you know, that's not his real name." I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well, his real name is a Cherokee name." I said, "Well, what is that?" And he said, "He's Gista." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah. The Unelanvhi, the Creator of all things, has given real names to all of the animals. And if you know those names, and you're in the woods and you're lost, and you call them by their real name—their Cherokee name—they will help you."

So suddenly I'm going, "Well, what's that animal that's a squirrel?" "Oh, no, that's a Saloli." So by age nine, I was—much like David Sedaris in his writing Me Talk Pretty One Day—I mostly spoke Cherokee in nouns. Verbs were kind of a problem for me, and they still are in the Cherokee language. But he was a great man, and even though he lived a very simple life as a 100% disabled veteran, he did well.

Now my grandmother, of course, she was descended from the Starrs, and they were the tribal Illuminati. These were people that were treaty signers and they were tribal officials. And she worked for the Indian Department in the 1930s and started schools.

**JE:** OK, I'm thinking about Belle Starr. Did she come from the Starrs that you're talking about?

**JH:** Yeah, she was not a Cherokee. She was just a deplorable woman who had married—now stick with me—had married my great-great-great-grandfather's nephew, Tom Starr. The Starrs were a huge family.

When they removed in the removal of the 1830s, the patriarch of the family, Caleb Starr—little Quaker boy who had run away from home in the early 1700s and intermarried among the Cherokees—fascinating story I'd love to tell you just briefly.

The Starr is actually a Northumbrian name. It's S-T-A-R-R, not like up in the sky. And in Middle English it's pronounced "star-ee" and it means hawk. Apparently, I had a grandfather—I will spare you the greats—back during the time of the English Civil War, and he must have been a highly persuasive man because he raised an entire company of pikemen during the English Civil War. So, how persuasive was he?

We don't have any muskets, we don't have any swords—we have long, pointed sticks. And we'll stand out in front of the guys in the back that are taking 30 minutes to make powder, load my wheellock, and try to shoot these people that are charging at us in armor on heavy horses—and we'll keep them back with our big sticks. He apparently was successful and received a land bounty in Northern Ireland, County Meath, and they moved there. And there was a Quaker meeting house there in a place called Cootehill.

So the Starrs—they become Quakers. And a couple of generations later, someone says, "Well, land's kind of wearing out here. There's a whole colony over in America that's full of Quakers. It's a place called Pennsylvania, and if we go there, we understand it's something."

So my family immigrates to what is now Lancaster. And then I'll speed up the story because mother—grandmother—dies, grandfather remarries, then grandfather passes away. And so now there's like eight Quaker children that are in the hands of a Quaker stepmother. And according to my cousins back in Pennsylvania, who I still keep in touch with, they're always delighted to speak with me because they say, "Oh, you're Caleb's children. You're our Indian cousins." Oh yeah, yeah. They probably think we're living in teepees.

If you went to the Quaker faith, you would find that—and I think they still do this today—they worship separately. Women are on one side, men are on the other. So the family's story is that she took the girls and the boys in the family after the funeral and lined them up by height and age. She just starts going down the line. It's like, "Rebecca, you'll be in charge of the cooking," and she gets to the boys and it's like, "You'll be in charge of the plowing." And she gets to my grandfather, Caleb Starr, who is 16 years old, and she said, "I have apprenticed you to a hatmaker in town and you start there on Monday."

So sure enough, Monday he shows up in a hattery in Lancaster. And he's there with other Quaker boys who've been apprenticed. And there's a young man sitting next to him by the name of Joseph McMinn. And remember that name for just a moment.

So they're sitting there making hats, and I like to think the conversation kind of went this way: "Joseph, I don't know about you, but I really don't much care for making hats." And he says, "You know, I have an uncle who is a crown trader. He has a license to trade with the Cherokee Indians in a place that he pronounces as 'Tanasi.' I bet if we went there, he'd put us to work."

Now, according to my Quaker cousins back in Pennsylvania, young Caleb got up one morning and did something he seldom did—he kissed all of his sisters that morning after breakfast. He said, "I'm going into work." And he left the house. And he and Joseph McMinn walked the Appalachian Trail all the way from Pennsylvania to Tennessee, to a place called Deliguah. They found his uncle and he put them to work. They were in the deer hide trade.

A couple of years later he met the granddaughter of Nancy Ward, the Beloved Woman of the Cherokees. And I like to think he looked at her and said, "How're you doin'?" And they got married. They had nine kids that were, once again, nine months and ten minutes apart.

**JE:** This is your grandfather?

**JH:** This is my grandmother. This is my grandmother Hannah, who was a Cherry Starr.

**JE:** But... he...

**JH:** But yes—my grandfather Caleb—he was my sixth grandfather. But much like another man that I know from Tulsa who moved there to simply be a radio announcer, it's about who you marry.

And when young Caleb married the granddaughter of Nancy Ward, he married into Cherokee Illuminati. And he became a great intermarried citizen of the Cherokee Nation. He was revered for his leadership and his honesty. And they had quite the farm on Conasauga Creek in the Ocoee River Valley. Today, it's a little place near Tellico Plains, and the mountain is still called Starr Mountain. They had orchards. I've been to where their cabin stood. And it's a sacred place in our family.

**JE:** Did you have brothers or sisters?

**JH:** I have one sister who is older by seven years. She's the smart one in the family.

**JE:** And her name is?

**JH:** Her name is Linda D. Hannah. We call her LD. She was named for our great aunt LD Starr, who was the first—she graduated from the [Cherokee word]. Which is—and for Cherokee listeners out in the future, I will say, [Cherokee word] my Cherokee is not so good, but what I said was, "It's the place where the big girls learn."

It was the Cherokee Female Seminary. Chief John Ross—who was my blood quantum—was very keen on establishing educational institutions among the Cherokees. And so we used part of our removal annuity monies, and he established a seminary for men and for women. We hired teachers from Mount Holyoke, just down the road from Harvard, and they came to Park Hill. The first opening day was May 7th of 1851. The male seminary opened on May 6th.

We don't celebrate the male so much, because the women have had a reunion every year—except for the American Civil War, and during COVID in 2020—when Jay Hannah was president of the Seminarians. We'll meet on May 7th again, and we celebrate the educational traditions of the Cherokees.

## Chapter 5 – 7:52
## Billy Joe Hogshooter

**John Erling (JE):** Your education—where did you go to grade school?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** In the same building I went to junior high and high school—in Watts, Oklahoma. You enter the east end of the building, and if you're lucky, you will come out the west end 12 years later.

**JE:** And you did.

**JH:** I did. Now, Dennis Pathkiller and maybe—you know—Ricky Quick and Billy Joe Hogshooter, they may have taken an extra year, something like that.

**JE:** Billy Joe Hogshooter?

**JH:** Billy Joe Hogshooter, yes. And you know, it's fascinating because inside of my first-grade class are the names of Cherokee elite—Dennis Pathkiller. Dennis is descended from Chief Pathkiller, one of our great principal chiefs prior to our constitutional years. We've had a written constitution since 1827, and prior to that, great chiefs were like Chief Hicks, and Pathkiller, Chief Doublehead. We had all sorts of these names—and their descendants were in my classroom.

**JE:** What year did you graduate from high school?

**JH:** Graduated in 1973. And yes, John, as I sit erect in my chair and grab my lapels—I was the valedictorian of a graduating class of 13.

**JE:** Well, congratulations.

**JH:** Thank you. Thank you so very much.

**JE:** In high school, were you active in sports, social clubs—or what did you do?

**JH:** The answer is yes. Because when you go to a school that in its entirety—first grade through senior year—has maybe, maybe, maybe a total of 200 people in it, you will do everything. If nothing else, you'll be voluntold to do it.

Yes, I was Citizen of the Year in the seventh grade. I played in elementary basketball. I would have loved to have played football, but our football team had been given a death sentence in 1964 after going to Copan High School. And to this day, we don't know, but there was an altercation that took place and several of the referees were sent to the hospital with some broken bones. The state secondary athletic board—they didn't suspend the Watts Engineers, they gave us a death sentence for two years.

And I was just in grade school at the time, but by the time I made it to a grade where I would have started playing football, we didn't have a football team. Because the school board was brilliant—they looked up one day and said, "You know, we're running ahead of budget here." And someone said, "Well, we don't have a football team. We don't have to buy equipment. It's not an extra bus. We don't have a football coach."

So I never really saw football played all through my entire school. I played basketball, ran track—elementary basketball, junior high, and also varsity team in high school. I was captain of the team. And it was a great school, even though the per-main-year cost to educate a child there was probably less than $300 a semester. And the entire school was on a free lunch program—including many of the teachers.

Except for—it was a wonderful education. Because in the 1960s, if you had student loan debt and you taught in an underprivileged area, the federal government would relieve you of your debt. So I took two years of Spanish. I had all of these science classes. I talked the principal into having a trigonometry class. Learned surveying. Did all sorts of academic elements that probably maybe schools in more quasi-affluent markets may not have had.

Because I had teachers that were from Northwestern University—not Northwestern Oklahoma, but the one in Chicago. My English teacher was a graduate of Northwestern, and she said, “You have to read this literature, Mr. Hannah. You need to read Shakespeare. You need to read Last of the Mohicans. You need to understand what these books mean.” And they would force me to write, and they would cause me to listen, and they would cause me to speak. And those skill sets were invaluable.

**JE:** And this is all in high school?

**JH:** Yeah, right there. Well, I mean, literally—first grade through twelfth, right in Watts, Oklahoma.

**JE:** And tell me, why did these teachers come—from Chicago or wherever?

**JH:** Well, some of them—

**JE:** Was it because of the Cherokee?

**JH:** No. Judy Witt—I wish I could have found her in later years. I'm certain that she’s gone on. But Judy Witt was from Chicago, and her husband was getting his master’s degree at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. And she thought, “While you're finishing your master’s, I’ll get a job teaching in a local school.” And she was a fish out of water, but I owe her such a great debt because she caused us to have a thespian club.

We put on plays. And it wasn't just a hillbilly farce—we did Cheaper by the Dozen. We did all sorts of things. She forced me to act. I credit her with me being a musician today.

We actually had kind of a spring play, and it was kind of a hillbilly farce. And between the second and third act, there was a long stage set change. She was in our English class. She said, "Well, does anyone here know how to play guitar or know how to sing?" And of course, Sharon Jones—this young lady who'd just returned to Adair County, her parents had been in the military in Hawaii—she had a phenomenal tan, I might add. She said, "Well, I'm a good singer, but I'll need somebody to accompany me."

And I raised my hand. I said, "Well, you know, guitar doesn't look that complicated. I've taken some piano lessons. My dad's a guitar player. I'll play guitar." Billy Joe Hogshooter laughed, but he said, "Well, I'll loan you my guitar. I don't know how to play it."

So I went home, and I found that my father had a Mel Bay chord book. And I asked Sharon, I said, "Well, what do you want to sing?" She said, "I think—uh, you know—some Tammy Wynette song or something." And it was just something that would be out in front of the curtain during the stage play.

And—let's see—"You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man." I don't even remember the name of that song. It was a classic 1960s song. It had three chords in it, and I found those three chords in the Mel Bay chord book, and I accompanied her.

And someone said, "Well, you know, you're a pretty good guitar player. How long have you been playing?" I said, "For about a week now." And then I thought, well, maybe I should just continue to do this. And so I rounded up a couple of other guys, and we formed a band. We started playing at school functions and local rodeos. And John, I'm still in a band today. And we still play.

**JE:** That's great. Are you playing guitar?

**JH:** Yeah. I'm a guitar player. I'm a singer. I'm a harmonica player. I'm a keyboard guy. I'm a banjo player. I'm all sorts of things.

**JE:** So you're the whole band in yourself.

**JH:** I could be. But I prefer to be with my lead guitar player, who is Cherokee and a professor at the Academy for Contemporary Music at the University of Central Oklahoma—Danny Hargis. I also have the chief investment officer for the oldest trust powers in the state of Oklahoma, Brad Zerger—who's our bass player. Our drummer is Charles Bartrug, who was a music major at the University of Oklahoma. He's in the marching pride and was a great secondary music instructor. And the bank's legal counsel, Brian Pearson—who's my brother—he is a phenomenal singer and an above-average guitar player. And we still play music.

**JE:** Because you taught yourself to play guitar.

## Chapter 6 – 6:43
## Robert Kennedy

**John Erling (JE):** So after high school, what do you do then?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** My senior English teacher, Nyla Phipps, who was from Westville, Oklahoma—she told me about certain things that I needed to do in high school. She said, "When you go to college..." And I said, "I'm going to college?" And she said, "Oh yes, you are." And I said, "Well, I don't know if my family can afford that." She said, "Well, you're going to make good grades here, Mr. Hannah, because you will get a scholarship."

She said, "Your Cherokee ancestors attended the seminaries," because the seminaries became Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. I knew this from stories from my dad and my grandmother. He did not attend college, which was phenomenal. I then discovered that a generation before my father, they had all attended the seminaries. My great-grandfather had attended during the 1890s. My great-great-aunt was in the class of 1899 and the first woman in our family to get a master's degree. She went on to Washington University in St. Louis and graduated in 1903 and came back and taught at the seminaries.

There was this era, though, of the Depression and the war that just

changed things up. So I got to return the tradition of going back to the Cherokee Seminary.

**JE:** OK, it's called seminary—we normally think of that as theological.

**JH:** We do. Once again, we have to credit Chief John Ross, who knew that we were sending the children of elite Cherokee leaders during the early 1800s—into the 1820s—we were sending them back East to attend school, mostly to religious seminaries. Because there were missionaries that had come among the Cherokees. The Moravians came among us in 1801 and came with us on the Trail of Tears. Their mission school is still in existence today. I grew up about six miles from Oaks, Oklahoma—a great place where I once gave directions to Robert Kennedy on how to get there to give a speech not too long before he…

**JE:** Oh, really? What were those directions?

**JH:** Well, my parents knew that he was going to speak at Oaks Indian Mission School, and they kept me out of my school. I didn't attend Oaks—I was attending at Watts. They were what are called rural entrepreneurs. Not only did we have the farm, but we also had a general store, Stinchcomb's Corner, on Highway 33.

Mom said, "If you stand out in front of the store, you'll see Bobby Kennedy when he drives by on his way to Oaks." And so, I stood out front, and sure enough, in about an hour I saw—once again—a black Lincoln coming down the road with little flags. And the thing that was really interesting: I started waving, and it pulled off of the highway and pulled up and stopped, and the window rolled down. And Bobby Kennedy looked at me and he said, "Young man, are we on the right road to Oaks Indian Mission?" And I pointed and I said, "Yes sir, you are, you're on the right road." And he drove away.

He was assassinated in a hotel room in California not long after that.

**JE:** He had no idea he was talking to the famous…

**JH:** …Jay Hannah of Moseley's Prairie.

**JE:** How old were you then?

**JH:** Let's see—I was probably… let's see, 1967. So, 10–12 years old at the time. A rising 12-year-old. It was in the spring of '67.

**JE:** But these seminaries—people would go there and not necessarily be trained to be missionaries or ministers?

**JH:** Not at all.

**JE:** It was really a college?

**JH:** It was a college. And we proudly say that at Northeastern, we're the second-oldest institution of higher learning west of the Mississippi River. These were passed to be built in 1846 by the tribal council.

**JE:** So then, obviously, you attended Northeastern State.

**JH:** Fourth generation to attend. Not only did my great-grandmothers attend there—my great-grandfather attended there, my mom attended there, my sister attended there—and yes, I took the same 1946 Underwood typewriter that my mother used with me to type out my first freshman papers. It's in my office today.

**JE:** That's great.

**JH:** I keep it there. And when people at work get a memo from me, they know they need to pay attention to it.

**JE:** So then, when do you graduate from Northeastern?

**JH:** 1977.

**JE:** That was a good experience, no doubt, at Northeastern for you?

**JH:** It was an exceptional experience for me because Northeastern had very small classes. They had bright individuals. My advisors were men of academic stature. As a matter of fact, if not for them, I would have not gone on to graduate school.

I went in to see—who later would become my father-in-law—Dr. Val Jean Littlefield, who, in his grave in Tahlequah, still holds the scholastic record for taking more debate teams consecutively to the national forensic tournament than any other debate coach in United States history—16 years in a row. Ph.D. from OU, two master's from the University of Tulsa. Bright

guy.

And he said, “You know, Jay, you need to take this class.” He was sort of like Nyla Phipps in high school. “You need to take this class because you’ll need that when you go to graduate school.”

I said, “Doc, I’m going to graduate school?” And he said, “Well, of course you are.” I said, “I don’t know if I can afford that.” He said, “Oh, we’ll get you a teaching assistantship while you’re there.” And I said, “Well, where am I going?”

He said, “Oklahoma State University.” And my other advisor, Tom Cottrell—who was my primary advisor—had just finished his doctorate at Oklahoma State, and they knew the chair of a department. A couple of phone calls and a few letters, and the next thing you know, I’m invited to be on the teaching faculty at Oklahoma State University and pursue a master’s degree.

Oh, John, in many ways—and I know in the future if people were to find this recording and listen to it, they’ll Google this, if there’s still a Google—but I’ve been the Forrest Gump of my entire life. I never set out to do anything. But I have been smart enough to listen to very bright and passionate people who saw something that said, “Maybe you should go on to the next stop.”

**JE:** So life is a box of chocolates, isn’t it?

**JH:** It really is. I know—it really is. You never know.

## Chapter 7 – 10:20
## Banking Business

**John Erling (JE):** But how did you get into the banking business? Was that—was that your calling?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** No, not at all. As a matter of fact, my undergraduate degree is in arts and letters. It's speech, it's English, it's history. I look back now at

my transcript and I only lacked three hours of being a double major. Probably should get that and get it completed.

When I went to graduate school, though, I thought, well, maybe I need the business perspective. And in those days, Oklahoma State University had an MBA program that was in the business school, but they also had a management school that was totally separate from the business school. Wayne A. Meinhart was the department chair. It was very East Coast in their management school structure. I did an interdisciplinary degree because remember, arts and sciences—so I'm teaching interpersonal studies in the arts and sciences school, but I'm attending management classes in the management school. Organizational theory was an absolute favorite.

After that, when I graduated, I thought, well, I will need to find a job. And I did—with Teledyne Economic Development Company in Los Angeles. It was a huge conglomerate of about 48 companies. They made everything from jet engines to Waterpiks. I worked in the federal contracting division, and they operated Job Corps centers across the United States. Since I did kind of a specialty in employee training and development, I was a training director for the Guthrie Job Corps Center.

I moved there thinking, well, I won't stay here that long, I'll just move along after a couple of years. Not really from Guthrie. All these people think that they have all this history up here because of the land run—which I had not studied in the sixth grade in Adair County. And I met Ralph McCalmont, who owned the First National Bank—the oldest bank in Oklahoma, founded on the day of the land run in a tent.

And the building was actually on the exact location where J.W. McNeal, a very successful buffalo hide trader from Kansas, had discovered that he was in Medicine Lodge, Kansas in 1888. He thought, this is not turning out to be the place you want to be. So when he read about the land run—April 22nd, 1889—he sold everything in Medicine Lodge, Kansas. He and his business partner, Alonzo Little, bought a ticket on one of the ten special trains that came in the land run and allegedly they jumped off that train, ran up the hill, and staked out the corner of First and Oklahoma Streets and established the first bank in Oklahoma.

See what he did there? He was a marketeer.

**JE:** In Guthrie?

**JH:** In Guthrie. And if you go to that address today, which is 202 West Oklahoma Avenue, there is a bank location of the bank that I work with—BancFirst—today. And we've been operating banking uninterrupted on that piece of ground since 2:30 p.m., April 22, 1889.

**JE:** So then you went to work for that bank?

**JH:** I did. Because Ralph McCalmont—I had foolishly, with my history background—I got elected to be the president of the Logan County Historical Society. Which I thought was a group of blue-haired ladies trenching all the residents into who were boomers and who were sooners. I had been a National Park seasonal ranger for five years, so I knew a lot about preservation, and I think that's what they were fascinated with.

And Guthrie was in its renaissance of historic preservation at that point. Mr. McCalmont was right at the middle of that. Matter of fact, I think he may have been the guy that suggested to people that I become the president of the Logan County Historical Society.

As I was operating a $990-some-odd-million Urban Development Action Grant, as we pioneered façade easement programs and other tax incentivization—because we had established the largest historic National Register district in, I think, the United States—ten square blocks.

I was doing lots of things while I had this job with Teledyne. My volunteer job was helping the local historical society to do history and preservation. And one day Ralph said, "Have you thought about being in the banking business?" I said, "No, not really." Even though, remember, on the Cherokee side of my family, my great-great-grandfather was secretary-treasurer of the Cherokee Nation and helped to establish the First National Bank in Tahlequah in the 1890s. But nobody in my immediate family were bankers. They were people that drove fancy cars and lived in fancy houses and played golf.

He told me of a business partner that he had—a man by the name of Gene

Rainbolt, who was from Norman, Oklahoma. And Gene had parlayed ownership in a number of community banks. He said, “We’re going to change the banking structure of Oklahoma.”

In the early 1980s, you could have one banking charter with no branches. You could have one detached facility within 1,500 feet of the main banking house. That was a product of Oklahoma reaching statehood at the height of an anti-business movement in the United States. So, branch banking didn’t exist. We had over 600 independently chartered banks in Oklahoma when I kind of entered the business in 1981.

And Ralph McCalmont was correct. He and Gene Rainbolt and some other bankers brought Oklahoma banking into a modern era. Established holding companies. We began to consolidate charters. And so the First National Bank of Guthrie was one of 12 that surrendered the oldest national banking charter in the state to join a newly formed company called BancFirst on April 1st of 1989.

John, you can always trust bankers that formed their company on April Fool’s Day. And today it’s a $14 billion financial institution in the state of Oklahoma, serving 60 communities with 125 different locations. And I’ve worked for them for 43 years this morning.

But I hadn’t planned—once again, Forrest Gump—I hadn’t planned on being a banker. It was suggested to me.

**JE:** Banking has changed a lot over the years since then to now. And there's so much to talk about in your life, but technology certainly must have affected banking since you started, in a major way.

**JH:** I just spoke with a student group this morning and told them that there will be very few things on my headstone. One will be the fact that I was the inventor of the BancFirst debit card. We didn’t have debit cards when I first worked in the bank.

**JE:** You invented that?

**JH:** Well, yes. I became a president of the bank in Guthrie. I later went to be the president of our bank in Tahlequah, which—oddly enough, John—had been owned by my Cherokee family about three generations before. That

bank was about to fail. I went there and sent several people to the penitentiary.

After getting it cleaned up, my current boss, David Rainbolt—who is the executive chairman of the board—said, “Why don’t you come out to the support center or corporate headquarters, and we’re going to put all of these banks together.”

So I came to the support center and discovered that there were many competitive products and services in bigger banks that we did not have. And I thought, well, if we’re going to really grow up, we need to keep up with the Joneses.

We were about to reissue ATM cards. You being a Tulsa guy will remember that there were early ATM cards at banks in Tulsa, and all you could do was go to an ATM. And I told our operations manager, I said, “No, we’re not going to reissue all these ATM cards. We’re going to make them be check cards.” That was the terminology—later, of course, known as debit cards.

Today, we have about 400,000 of them that are issued across the state of Oklahoma. And the cool part is—if I pulled mine out and showed it to you—it has the identical artwork on it that you will find on the Oklahoma quarter. Because in 2008, this finger, John, right here, I went to the Denver Mint and made the first Oklahoma quarter—the scissortail flycatcher.

And since we were the issuing bank, and I had made the first quarter along with Governor Henry and some other Illuminati from the state, I said, “Could I use that artwork?” And they said, “Why, sure.” And it’s on our debit card today. The only bank on the planet—maybe even the solar system—to have that design on it.

**JE:** You also headed up Wilma Mankiller’s likeness on the quarter.

**JH:** I did. Because Wilma Mankiller is a very dear friend of mine. We grew up in the same tribal community—although Wilma was about ten years older—and her family had been removed to California in the 1950s era of diminishing Cherokee centralization of our tribal communities.

Wilma did come back, though, and she ultimately became chief. That was

when I had a chance to meet her. We served together on a private industry council, and then later—it was really sort of my introduction into doing tribal work.

So when the U.S. Mint decided to introduce their Women of Influence series—a wide variety of women who have made phenomenal contributions to the United States—Wilma Mankiller was selected. And our bank was chosen to be the issuing bank. Since I knew Wilma Mankiller, I officiated the first day issuing ceremony in Tahlequah.

**JE:** And I should say that, of course, we have Wilma Mankiller's interview. We launched our website with her, as a matter of fact. And her husband, Charlie Soap...

**JH:** Charlie Soap—good friend of mine.

**Chapter 8 – 12:20**
**Constitutional Convention**

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**John Erling (JE):** We should talk a little bit more about Gene Rainbolt, who recently passed. And would he be considered a mentor to you? Talk about what kind of person he was.

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Well, Gene Rainbolt... I am nowhere near—I could not touch his hem of being a true entrepreneur—but Gene and I had a very close relationship, especially here in these latter years. We both began to talk about the influences that we had in our lives.

Gene was raised by his mom. His parents never divorced, but they separated during the Depression years. He was born in the late 1920s. The house he was born in on Pickard Street in Norman still stands. He had several brothers and sisters. The importance of education was there because OU was literally just a handful of blocks away.

He goes to OU, he's in an ROTC program. The Korean War is going on. He goes to Korea, he comes home, he decides to get an MBA. Then he's going to be—and of course the Rainbolt family, I'm glad they'll not hear this—he

was invited to get his PhD at the University of Texas. But he was also offered a job to teach economics at Washington and Lee over in Virginia.

And he was going back and forth on what to do educationally when he got a phone call from a friend of his that he had known in the Army in Korea. He said, “Hey, I’m still in the military, and the base exchange at Okinawa is out of control. I want you to come to Okinawa and run the base exchange here.” Gene always told the story and smiled. He said, “I can’t give you the one star, but I can give you the pay of a one-star general.” And he said, “I’m going to Okinawa.”

So he went there for a couple of years, got that under control, came home, and then got in the banking business. And yes, he was my mentor, and he was my friend, and I loved him dearly.

**JE:** Yeah. And we have his interview on Voices of Oklahoma. We could talk a lot about the banking business, but we also want to talk about—since you're a citizen of the Cherokee Nation—you’ve served them in a financial way as well. You were the nation’s Secretary-Treasurer, Chairman of the Nation’s 1999 Constitution Convention, and have been really involved in many capacities of the Nation. Talk to us about some of that.

**JH:** Well, once again, I never set out to be a tribal official. But we had an era of consternation in our tribe during the 1990s. We had a Principal Chief—and I'm known for naming names, so I'll just say it outright—Chief Joe Byrd, who I had actually gone to college with. I knew Joey. He was from down in Sequoyah County. And he had a very contentious principal chief era. There were some allegations of election issues.

The tribunal of the Cherokee Nation, which was our only judiciary, sent the marshals to get some evidence of a potential case against the chief. And our Constitution in the 1990s had actually been written in 1975. We’ve had four written constitutions since 1827—so 1827, 1839, 1975, and ultimately 1999, which I’ll speak to.

But during the Byrd era, he fired all the marshals because they were not protected by the Constitution. He impeached the three-man tribal tribunal, which was both a court of origination and appeal. In other words, it was like he went in and fired all the judges of the Cherokee Nation. It’s

very hard to be prosecuted by a court when you have the power to dismiss them.

Out of that, it just so happened that the planets aligned. Because here we have this political upheaval going, but the framers of the 1975 Constitution were brilliant. Chief Ross Swimmer—who, of course, was the man who sort of introduced Wilma Mankiller to her pathway toward Principal Chief—was ostensibly the writer of the '75 Constitution. And he realized that he could not see over—and this is a classic Jay Hannah line—he could not see over the curvature of time.

He knew that Indian Country was an evolution. We'd only had the ability to re-elect our own principal chiefs since 1970. Many tribes only had the ability to reform their governments after the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936. The federal government in the 1830s didn't have any problem rounding up Indians in the Indian Removal Act. But by the 1930s, 100 years later, it's like, well, we're really feeling bad about this, so we'll let these tribes put their governments back together.

In that '75 Constitution, the final article said that 20 years hence, the Cherokee people will be asked if they would like a new constitution, an amendment, or whatever. And sure enough, that question went on the election ballot of 1995. And the Cherokee citizens, because of this political upheaval, they said, "Oh yes, we need to look at our Constitution."

The Oklahoma Indian Child Welfare Act had been passed in 1978. We now had marshals that could arrest you. Indian Country was in an evolution toward a much more perfect sovereignty of running their own government.

So I received a phone call one day from Troy Wayne Poteet, who was on the [Cherokee word]—on the Tribal Council. He said, "Jay, we're putting together a Constitutional Convention Commission, and the Tribal Council seems to think that you are honest. And we would like for you to be on that commission."

We spent months researching historical constitutions, talking with

constitutional scholars. I suggested that we actually go into tribal communities—not just in the Cherokee Nation, but we Cherokees are kind of all over the place. A lot of Cherokees in California, Texas, New Mexico. We held 21 public meetings and took down every word through court reporter transcripts of what citizens said they wanted to see in the Constitution.

The commission determined by December of 1998 that we would have to have a real constitutional convention. We met weekly. Every weekend I drove to Tahlequah, and we put together the mechanics of a convention. We selected 74 delegates. I won't bore you with the delegate selection, but it was very well tranched. We had so many members from the judiciary, so many from the Tribal Council, so many from the executive branch. We even had citizens who could volunteer. If you were a Cherokee citizen, you could say, "Yeah, I'd be a delegate." And I rolled up my sleeve, reached into a basket, and pulled out names—they were going to be delegates to the convention.

The day they were gaveled in, I'm sitting in the back thinking, "Man, this is great. My work's done here." The very first motion made on the floor—we had proposed that there would be a titular chairman. It was going to be Dr. Charlie Gourd, who was of the Rattling Gourds. He had a PhD and had worked in the tribe. I thought, "Be the chairman, Charlie."

The first motion was made to elect a chairman. And, of course, Charlie—you can read those transcripts, because I had suggested we get a court reporter to take down every word at the convention. I'm always tired of attorneys saying, "We have no idea what the framers meant when they wrote this." Well, how about we just see the transcripts of the framers?

So we had a Cherokee court reporter there from Stilwell, and she's taking down the transcripts. Two people were nominated to be chair of the Constitutional Convention: Mr. Gourd and Mr. Hannah. So I thought, "Well, maybe I won't be elected to this."

We went to the front. I introduced myself in Cherokee. And John, I love this—we told about who our families were. I said, "I am the grandson"—because remember, it's matriarchal, so your Cherokee grandmother tells everybody who you are—"I am the grandson of Gaya

Starr."

And I heard a delegate on the front row lean over and say, "Treaty Party." You know, which was the political group that actually signed the treaties to remove the Cherokees—where Cherokees died. And many of them were assassinated. My family was the target of assassination during the 1840s.

I turned my head thinking, "You would have thought we'd gotten over that by now."

We had planned for the convention to be a three-day event. It was nine days. It ran for 10, 12, one day 14 hours. And I gaveled through the entire convention. At the end of it, we had a new Constitution. It was ratified by the Cherokee people, and it is the law of the land today.

But because of that, and I thought, "Okay, my service to the Cherokee Nation is over. I'll go back to just being a banker." But then I received a phone call from Chief Chadwick "Corn Tassel" Smith. He said, "Mr. Hannah, the Tribal Council—they trust you because of what you did in the Constitutional Convention."

I said, "And?" And he said, "They're going to have a vote of no confidence on the treasurer of the Cherokee Nation this evening at 6:30. And I really can't afford for them to do that. So he's going to resign at 5:30, and I want you to agree to be appointed as Secretary-Treasurer at 6:30."

I said, "Well, Chad, I already have, like, a real daytime job." And he said, "Not a problem. You only have to do this for 90 days. Then I'll find someone in the tribe that the Tribal Council will accept."

John, I served four years of a 90-day appointment. During that period of time, I restructured our budgets, restructured our audits, and was finally able to slap my hands together like a casino teller and tell them that all this money is accounted for—just as my great-great-grandfather Ezekiel Eugene Starr had done in the 1890s.

And I said, [Cherokee word]—in Cherokee it means, "I'm going."

**JE:** So you took a leave of absence from BancFirst?

**JH:** Actually, I have to credit David Rainbolt. Because when I told him that I was going to be the Secretary-Treasurer, if he would allow it, he said, “This is important—not just for you personally—but this is important for the Cherokee people, it’s important for the state of Oklahoma. And I expect for you to do both jobs.”

So one year, I drove 13,000 miles between Norman and Tahlequah and Catoosa. And I didn’t take any pay. I want that to be on the official record. I told the Chief, “If I take money from you for being the Treasurer, you might start telling me what to do. And I might feel obligated to do it. I will work for the people of this Nation.” And I exhausted all of my personal leave, all my vacation time, and I worked on weekends. And I did both jobs.

## Chapter 9 – 22:14
## Wilma Mankiller

**John Erling (JE):** You brought a book along, Around Tahlequah Council Fires. So why did you bring that?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Well, first of all, this is only one of about 100 copies that were made. It was written by a professor at the era that Northeastern State—well, excuse me, Northeastern Normal School, as it was first known after it was the Female Seminary. Theo Ballinger was a professor at that school. I got to meet him and hear a lecture from him in my first year of college. He was a phenomenal guy. He was teaching on that campus when it became a state college, and he wrote this book in 1935. It is a collection of stories from Tahlequah, mostly focused on the Cherokee people—seminal moments that he thought would be important.

The one that I wanted to share with you is once again directly related back to my family and to my treasurership. It's the chapter entitled The Cherokee Payment Tragedy. It says on May 30th of 1894, Treasurer E.E. Starr, my grandfather, was accredited paymaster for the Cherokee government, passed through Fort Smith with $1 million in coin and paper money to pay the individual Cherokees their share of the large amount coming from the sale of the Cherokee Strip. He went with a strong guard

to Fort Gibson.

And by the way, John, there is a photograph of that disbursement at Fort Gibson. If you look at all of the armed Cherokees, they're around the money. My grandfather, the treasurer, is in the middle. But if you look to the far left-hand side of the photograph, there's a 10-year-old boy standing there. That's my great-grandfather, Charles Lucian Starr. It was kind of a "go with your dad to work" day kind of a thing.

The book goes on to say that he went with a strong guard to Fort Gibson and thrice to Tahlequah, where on Monday, June 4th, the distribution commenced. The payment continued until Saturday, June 16th. Captain Cochran, with a guard of 50 well-armed men, stationed around the treasurer's office during the payment. And it goes on to talk about the fact that each Indian got $265.70, paid in gold, greenbacks, or checks as desired. A phenomenal man, and there was absolutely no loss of funds during that entire distribution.

**JE:** Did you work closely with Wilma Mankiller on certain projects?

**JH:** Indeed. Wilma was very keen on the Nation not being an island. About 1990, she created a thing called the Private Industry Council, and she went to various communities—Stilwell, Salina, Grove—she went to all these major county seats or towns and cities within the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation, which overlays 14 counties in northeastern Oklahoma. There, she would approach either municipal government or chambers of commerce. She said, “How can the tribe work with you?”

Wilma was a pan-cultural leader. She wasn’t just, “It’s all about the Cherokee.” She realized that we all lived here together. She asked if I would co-chair that council with her, and so we traveled about the Cherokee Nation meeting with various entities. I think Wilma probably thought, “Well, you’re president of the bank here in Tahlequah, I’ll need a banker—someone who’s not in the tribal government—to maybe have a bit of cachet with economic development in the Nation.” So yeah, we did a lot of interesting things to help grow partnerships between the economic prowess of the Cherokee Nation and established industrial parks or economic initiatives that were in these various towns within the Cherokee Nation.

**JE:** What would you say is your greatest talent or ability? How would you describe that?

**JH:** Well, Mankiller was a gatherer of people. If she were here seated with us today and we said, “Oh, here's Oscar Young, the chief, Mankiller,” she’d say, “I’m not really the chief. I’m really a cheerleader for us.” She had no hesitation in reaching for other tribes, reaching for non-tribal people. She realized—and people in the future may hear this and think I’m just making a reference to a Democratic presidential candidate, but I’m not—I hate that she borrowed this title for her book, and I’m talking about Hillary Clinton, but she was right: It takes a village. Wilma Mankiller knew that. And she saw to it that she built a village—not just in the Cherokee Nation, but literally around the country and around the world.

**JE:** Charlie spoke so eloquently about the Bell water project.

**JH:** Oh yes, the great community of Bell.

**JE:** So there’s a gathering there?

**JH:** There’s a gathering there, and at a time when I would tell you that I don’t know that the Cherokee citizenry that lived back in these rural communities saw the evolution of the tribal government as something new. I don’t know that they understood or necessarily trusted it. Remember, the Cherokee Nation as a government—it was Brigadoon. It had been in the mist since 1906. We were not allowed to elect our own principal chiefs between 1906 and 1970. The President of the United States had the authority to appoint people to be principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.

My great-great-uncle, William Watie Hastings—W.W. Hastings—was appointed by FDR to be the principal chief in 1936 for one day. His appointment said, “You will be the principal chief of the great and sovereign Cherokee Nation from sunup until sundown,” and his entire job was to sign a deed to transfer a piece of tribal land to build the Indian hospital in Tahlequah. Once again, it shows the psychosis of the evolution of federal government. It’s like, well, we’re going to force allotment on you between 1898 and 1906, but then later on we’ll go, “Well, when we take your land away from you, we’ll actually not steal it from you—we’ll appoint your own chief to give it to us.” Seventeen chiefs between 1906 and 1970,

when we were allowed under the Congressional Principal Chiefs Act to once again elect our own chiefs.

**JE:** Does the federal government have any muscle or input on the Cherokee Nation to this very day?

**JH:** I'll borrow a phrase from an Arkansas school teacher in Timbo, Arkansas, who wrote the famous song "The Battle of New Orleans." I'm speaking of Jimmy Driftwood. Spent the afternoon with him—phenomenal guy. In that song, it says, "There weren't as many as there was a while ago." And it's so very true today.

The constitution that I spoke of earlier—the federal government did not want to recognize our constitution. They said, "Oh, well, we have to approve that." Oh no, you don't, because we are an inherent sovereignty tribe. We get to decide what our own constitution is. And so, for years between the actual recess of the constitutional convention in March of 1999, the actual establishment of the new 1999 constitution wasn't until 2006. Because we battled with the federal government to agree to recognize that we had our own constitutional document—that they had no authority to approve.

And to this day, there continues to be this back and forth between self-governance. And of course, in this modern era—the McGirt case, the Murphy case—I was very fortunate to be invited to continuing education at the OU Law School four weeks ago, which was totally focused on Indian law. I spoke at the Sovereignty Symposium, which is operated by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, in 2018, and warned people—mostly tribally at that time—as the McGirt decision was getting ready to come in from the Supreme Court, we should be careful as tribes. Perhaps not chase the Greyhound bus. We may, in fact, catch it.

But since then, there are nine tribes in Oklahoma that have been determined by the courts were not disestablished after statehood—that their boundaries are, in fact, exactly what they were pre-statehood. And therefore, the jurisdictional authority inside of those boundaries is as it was prior to the state of Oklahoma. Meaning that tribal law and federal law are the primary, plenary laws in those particular districts.

It's been contentious between the state of Oklahoma, our current

governor, many municipalities. And at the same time, if we talked with the federal magistrates in the Northern District where you live in Tulsa, they'll tell you this is working just fine. We are hand-in-hand with tribal governments in maintaining their sovereignty and prosecuting cases that need to be prosecuted within these districts.

This is not done yet. It is still a long, long walk. But it is one that, if both tribes and the state and the federal government will continue to take a page from Wilma Mankiller—and if they will gather and see what is in actuality not only from history but what will be in the future—this will work just fine.

**JE:** I don't think you need any help from the federal government, do you?

**JH:** We have treaties with the federal government and have since 1785. And they have obligations to us. We have obligations to them. We should both keep those obligations.

**JE:** But the Cherokee Nation's in great shape today. I remember—I think it was, was it Ross Swimmer I interviewed or Wilma—the issue of casinos became an issue. Which one would it have been?

**JH:** Well, it was Wilma. I was president of the bank in Tahlequah, and Wilma Mankiller called me and she said, "Jay, I would like to come see you." And I said, "Yes, Chief, not a problem." She came with Tommy Thompson, who was the chief financial officer for the Cherokee Nation. They sat down in my office right across from the Cherokee Square—which my fourth great-grandfather had burned to the ground during the American Civil War. He was the brother-in-law of General Stand Watie and company commander, Company H.

And I'll get back, but you have to hear this sidestep, because we on the Starr side of the family—we were urban developers. The story goes that General Watie told my grandfather, Captain Starr, he said, "We have word that tribal council is going to capitulate the treaties with the Confederacy, and I need for you to ride into Tahlequah and persuade them to not do that." And my grandfather took Company H—I believe it's in October of '63—and he convinced them by burning the council house to the ground. And then he burned Tahlequah to the ground. And just to put some punctuation on it, they rode out to Park Hill and burned Chief John Ross's

very fancy plantation-style home—burned that to the ground too. Kind of at least delayed their decision for a while.

But when you look at gaming—Wilma's seated there and she says, "Jay, we need to borrow some money at the tribe to build a bingo hall in Roland, Oklahoma." I said, "Wilma, you know, I've read our constitution, and it actually says that the official depository of the Cherokee Nation is the First National Bank up the street—that my great-great-grandfather helped to found in the 1890s. And I'm pleased that you're here, but how is it that you've come to see me for these monies?"

She said, "Well, I went there, and they've turned us down." And I said, "Wilma, why would they do that?" And she said, "Because the vice president of that bank is a political enemy of mine, and he's not going to assist me in doing what I need to do to bring enterprise into the Nation." I said, "How much do you need?" "Well," she said, "$846,000." And I said, "And this is for a bingo parlor?" She said, "Yes."

And then Tommy Thompson stepped in and he said, "You know, Jay, there's a loan program in the U.S. Department of the Interior, and you could actually get a guarantee if you loaned us the money from the federal government." I said, "How much would that guarantee be, Tommy?" He said, "Ninety percent." I said, "You know, we should get you an application today."

Now, John, my lending authority was not over a million dollars when I was the president in Tahlequah, so I actually had to come here to Oklahoma City. I met with the chief credit officer of BancFirst—Bob Gregory, a phenomenal banker, still living, retired and in his 80s, but a prince of a man. He looked at me and said, "Mr. Hannah, I see that you're wanting to loan a federally recognized Indian tribe over a million dollars to construct a building in Sequoyah County."

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "And I understand that you can't take a mortgage on that piece of property because it's in something called Indian Country?"

I said, “That is correct, sir.”

He said, “And the only collateral that you have are tables and chairs and this thing called a ball popper—and a couple of other items that are inside of this building?”

I said, “That is correct, sir.”

He said, “And they don’t equal $846,000.”

I said, “No, they do not. There is maybe $40,000 worth of collateral here.”

And he said, “And plus, if we wanted to repossess those items, they have Indian marshals that could prevent us from going in to get that collateral?”

I said, “Yes, sir, that is very true.”

And he says, “And you have a 90% guarantee from the federal government on this loan?”

I said, “Yes, sir, I do.”

And he said, “Let’s sign that memo and get that casino built.”

And we did.

After that, I was partnered with Wilma on the Mingo parlor in Catoosa and another of our locations out in West Siloam Springs—which, oh, that’s right, John, it was within two miles of where I grew up. And I thought, here I am helping my tribe to build an economic engine on a place where I played as a kid. It was the old John Brown University airport grounds.

Later, I would be chairman of the board of all tribal enterprises and would build out multiple casinos for the Cherokee Nation—including that thing you know of in Catoosa called the Hard Rock. When I stepped out of the role in 2012 of being chairman of the board of Cherokee Nation Businesses, I left them with, as I recall, $620-some-odd million a year in income. Twenty-two companies that we diversified.

Because I kept telling the tribal council—it was a bad analogy, but at the time I thought it was great—I said, "I wish to be the Michael Corleone of the Cherokee Nation." I said, "You know, smoky bingo parlors in another 50 years from now or less may not be socially fashionable. We should have other businesses that have real services." So I took us into Department of Defense contracts.

It did cost me—I had to get a top-secret military clearance—but we made latches for C-130s here at Tinker Air Force Base. We had programs at the Redstone Arsenal in Alabama. And those businesses combined helped to diversify away from gaming. And I'm told today by my tribal officials that our actual income to the Nation from our enterprises is now more from non-gaming activities than it is from gaming activities.

Wonderful. It is wonderful.

Now, my analogy was bad, because you'll recall in The Godfather movie that Michael Corleone was going to take the family legitimate by moving them from New York City to Reno to go into the gambling business—but they did kind of get out of the other business they were in when they left.

**JE:** Were you considered to be a running mate for Wilma Mankiller?

**JH:** I only have a couple of letters in my safe deposit box. One is from Garrison Keillor, who invited me to be on The Prairie Home Companion after his producer—who was on vacation at Hot Springs National Park—saw me doing a program with some music and some storytelling. He said, "Well, he'd be great for the program." And I turned them down, John, because I had no idea what The Prairie Home Companion was.

And the other letter is from Chief Mankiller. It was written to me in 1991. I'm president of the bank in Tahlequah, and it was a two-page handwritten letter. She says, "Jay," she said, "I want you to be my running mate." She said, "This will be the last time I'm gonna run for Chief. We'll run as a ticket. We will be elected. We'll do a four-year term."

She said, "I will step out of the Chief's position two years into our term, and you will become the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. And then after that, you can decide if you want to continue to be an Indian Chief or if you

want to do something else."

And I did not sleep for three days. I prayed hard about this, and my wife and I talked about it. I talked with Gene Rainbolt—I was on the Academy for State Goals at the time, and we had a meeting here on a Saturday morning at the California Street location here in Oklahoma City.

And Jean—of course Wilma was brilliant—she'd already called Mr. Rainbolt to say, "I'm offering Jay to run with me for Chief." And he said, "Now, Jay," he said, "You know, that's an important job. But I think you have an important job here at the bank." And he did his hands in a Y shape and said, "You have to decide if you're going to be a banker or an Indian Chief."

And I decided to be a banker. I don't think I'll regret that decision. Later on—not as a Chief—and much as my ancestors, I don't have any Chiefs in our family, but we have been advisors to Chiefs, and we have been Treasurers, and we have been people that have served the Nation.

And that's really, John, all I ever wanted to accomplish in the Cherokee Nation—was to simply be able to cross the river at some point and not have my ears pulled by my Cherokee grannies that I had somehow "gone white" in my life—that I had served my people. I think I could probably get over there and not have too much of a lecture from my Cherokee grannies.

**JE:** So no regret at all by making—

**JH:** None whatsoever. Wilma and I continued to be very close friends all the way up until her passing. She called me to her bedside three days before she passed away.

**JE:** What were your words—your final words, you think?

**JH:** My final words to her was that—of course I asked her a question. You know, John, there's only like three people on the face of the planet that know this. It was a very private conversation.

But I did ask her, I said, "Why are we friends?" I said, "I'm a light-skinned Cherokee from northern Adair County, and you're Wilma Mankiller. You've got the Presidential Medal of Freedom hanging by your wood stove in the hallway."

And she said, “Well, you’re honest with money. And you’re honest with people.” She said, “That’s all I’ve been looking for—is people to be honest with me and be honest with other people.”

I did tell her though—because she looked at me, she’d maybe had a little morphine at that point—and she said, “Jay, I’m going out into space.” I said, “Yes, Wilma, you are. And I’ve read that the theory of physics is the further that you get away from gravity, time slows down.”

I said, “You know, Wilma, by the time you get across the river, let’s say you get your socks off to get them dry—I’ll be there right behind you. And I will join you across the river, and we will do more things together.”

And she said, “I will see you there.”

**JE:** I have tears right now. So do you. That’s something. That’s good.

**JH:** She’s a good woman.

**Chapter 10 – 17:45**
**National Park Ranger**

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**John Erling (JE):** You've done a lot of things in your life, and I don't have time to name them all, but you were a participant in Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government for two years as a lecturer at both the Kennedy School and Harvard Law on Native constitutional reform.

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Yes. I, you know, after the constitutional era, and especially after the Constitution itself—and I remarked that the convention ended in '99, but it was not voted on by the people until '03 and ratified—and then the federal government took another three years trying to fight us from it becoming the law of the land. Law schools would contact me and say things like, "You're the only chairman of a tribal constitutional convention in modern times. Would you come and talk with us about it?" So I started writing law journal articles, and I'm not a lawyer, but Arizona State University, Federal Bar Association... it was while I was speaking at the Federal Bar Association about modern constitutional reform that a young

man came up and he said, "I've come here from Harvard to meet you." He said, "We want to invite you to come to Harvard." He said, "Here's my card. I know you're busy, but if you'll call me..."

And what I discovered is that the Kennedy School was in fact assembling a program to help Native governments transition from federally controlled constitutional governments into governments of their own, and grappling with serious issues: per capita payments, blood quantum—oh my gosh, there's just a litany of modern challenges to Indian Country, of the 500 federally recognized tribes that are here.

So I thought, well, I'm a curious man, John. I thought, well, I'll go there and see if they actually put their pants on the way that we do. And sure enough, they really did. And I've worked with tribes from the northern part of the United States—the Lummi, on Bellingham Peninsula in Washington—they had a representative there, and he said, "Come meet with our elders and tell them this will be all right. You see, we're very elder-driven." And I flew to meet with the Lummi elder council in this ginormous tribal council hall with these gigantic cedar poles. They had gill-netted salmon that day and cedar-planked, and I talked with their elders about, this is a needed evolution. Your tribe, in many ways, while holding on to tradition, has also evolved to continue to be a tribe. That's our greatest challenge—how do we continue to be tribal and not stuck in an era where we will be disestablished or we'll be no longer recognizable.

**JE:** But at Harvard, you were the expert.

**JH:** Well, I was only the expert because I was the only one here that had done it.

**JE:** Doesn't that make you an expert? They were learning from you.

**JH:** Well, I was sharing with them what we had done. And I would tell you, John, it wasn't me. You see, I was a part of a village to the constitutional process. Ralph Keene is a young attorney who is in an office in Stilwell, Oklahoma, right now, and his father was on the Cherokee Judiciary Tribunal under the '75 Constitution. He was vice chairman of the Constitutional Convention Commission. And yes, there was Charlie Gourd, and yes, there was Luella Coon from East Pine in Adair County, who was like the second employee of the Cherokee Nation under W. W. Keeler

when it reformed. These are all people that I got to sit in rooms with and talk to and hear their thoughts on how we would be about these things. So I was really just a voice. That's all—just a voice.

**JE:** This is more about Harvard. Was it a nice experience, environment, and...?

**JH:** I loved it there. I was very pleased that there in the commons there's a plaque on the wall of one of the buildings and it commemorates the fact that Caleb Cheeshahteaumuck of the Wampanoags was their first Native American graduate in 1665. You know, there are two schools back east, John, that have in their charters an obligation to educate Indian children—that's Harvard and Dartmouth. Wilma Mankiller was later on the advisory board at Dartmouth. I spent some time walking the halls of Harvard and found them to be very convivial because they recognized that there was a new resurgence of governance happening inside of Indian Country. And for me, I was just a boy from Adair County that was a practitioner. They wanted me to stay. They said, "Hey, get another master's degree and we'll write books and we'll do things." But much like Gene Rainbolt and his call from Wilma Mankiller, I was—well, am I going to be a Harvard guy or am I going to be a banker? I'm from Adair County.

**JE:** When you spoke to the Harvard people in Cherokee, I suppose they just sat up and really took notice.

**JH:** Well, remember, "Jajalagi echisota"—you know, if you're speaking to non-speakers, it's fine. During a recent 30-hour Cherokee language class, I discovered that, yeah, even my Cherokee is probably equivalent to maybe a three-year-old.

**JE:** Oh yeah. What about the preservation of the Osage language in the younger generation? When the current chief or whatever—aren't you having classes and teaching the young ones?

**JH:** The Osages are. But I would tell you—

**JE:** Among Osage—

**JH:** Among the Cherokee, though, we have—

**JE:** Did I say Osage?

**JH:** You did, but that's OK. I will say that we used to shoot at them recreationally at one point. But after all, they did get that part of our treated land in 1835 that had all the oil in it. But we kept all the ticks and the copperheads.

**JE:** My mistake.

**JH:** That's quite all right. I learned here.

**JE:** There you have it.

**JH:** Yes. As a matter of fact, our current administration has just invested over $20 million in the Freeling—named for one of our great fluent speakers and a teacher—the Freeling Language Center. Just a month ago, 40 of my fellow Cherokee citizens here in Oklahoma City, we spent 30 hours of instruction in language. We spent a weekend at the First Americans Museum from 8 to 5 on a Saturday and Sunday where we, in sessions, spoke only Cherokee. And that's challenging when your Cherokee instructors will ask you questions in Cherokee, and then you're supposed to respond.

I cheated, though. Being a two-and-a-half-year-old quality speaker from my grandparents, I could always look at my instructors and say, "Galisiiwi," which they would laugh at because in Cherokee it means "tell me in English." And they would have to—because I'm an elder. You can't say that to an older. You know, our language is very culturally designed as well. There's things you can say to elders and things that you cannot—it would be disrespectful. So being the second-oldest student in that class, I was able to say, "Galisiiwi," and they had to say it in English. And then other students in the class would go, "Well, what did he say to you?" And they'd go, "Well, he said I had to say this in English," and I had to do that.

**JE:** Did you ever—have you taught history? I mean, this has been a history lesson with you, and you must have taught many classes. You could have been a history professor.

**JH:** I have delivered history talks either here at the Oklahoma Historical Society or at various—you know, I've been on museum boards. As a matter of fact, John, I'm going in less than two weeks to deliver a presentation in Tahlequah to the tribe's historic preservation group on Sam Houston living among the Cherokees. I am a Mason. I am a member of the Masonic

Lodge in Tahlequah, which is the oldest Masonic lodge in the state, founded in the 1840s. My great-great-grandfather was the lodge secretary, and we have Sam Houston's sword there that was given to Chief Bowles of the Cherokees during the Texas Revolution. It made its way back to Tahlequah, and to my knowledge it's never been out of the Masonic Lodge.

So when the tribal preservation officer of the tribe says, "Mr. Hannah, do you know about this sword?" I said, "I can get that sword brought out of the lodge into a program." The lodge secretary is going to take the Sam Houston sword, and I'm going to give a talk on Sam Houston and his three or four years living among the Cherokee.

**JE:** How interesting that would be.

**JH:** I'm an armchair historian, John—not a teacher. I'm just an armchair guy.

**JE:** Yes, you served in the Civil War, a living history unit?

**JH:** Yeah. Well, my economic resources in going to college were not as great as they should have been. Yes, Nya Phipps, that high school English teacher, was right—I did get a scholarship. But it was a Regents scholarship, and it didn't pay for everything, so I had to have summer jobs. My freshman year summer job, I worked for the White Pass and Yukon Railroad in Skagway, Alaska, and made a lot of money. So much so, I didn't have to do work-study. I paid for my college and had a great time. I was planning on just repeating that process my sophomore summer.

Unfortunately, the railroad was having a strike. A friend of my parents was an educator and an archaeologist at the University of Arkansas—you know, you grow up over near the Arkansas line and you'll know people on both sides. He asked my dad, "What's Jay doing this summer?" He said, "Well, he was going back to Alaska to work on the railroad, make money to go to college." And he said, "Well, we've just had a slot open at the National Park in Hot Springs, and I think he might be well suited for that."

Once again, somebody's suggesting to me I do something. After that, I spent five summers as a National Park Ranger in the National Park Service. During that time, of course having an interest in the American Civil War, I fell in with a group of National Park Service reenactors. We'd go to Jefferson Barracks, and I actually enjoyed camp life better than all the

drilling with 1858 .58 caliber muskets and wool uniforms. I liked cooking on a campfire, Dutch oven cooking, and taking naps in tents. I did that interpretation quite well.

**JE:** But you've talked about being a guitar picker.

**JH:** Yes.

**JE:** Tell us—has your band fronted anybody? Come on after somebody? Are you that professional that you could actually perform in that manner?

**JH:** Well, we're not professional by any stretch. We were founded on October 15th of 1983 for the opening of an attorney friend who had restored a 1930s roadhouse. He said, "We'll need a name for your group." I just picked up some local guys, and at that time I was president of the bank in Guthrie. And there at the Guthrie exit there was a hand-painted billboard of a man who had an embryo transfer laboratory. Which, for those that might listen, they can research and find out about bovine embryo transfers.

I thought, you know, it was such a gaudy sign—it was huge—and I thought, what a great name for a faux country-western group: Billy Bob Bovine and the Embryo Transfer. So we performed there, and the next thing you know, people said, "Yeah, that's kind of a cool group you've got. Could you just keep these people together?"

Band members have come and gone, and some have died, and some have probably gone to jail if the truth were known. But there's a core group of us that have been together throughout this entire time. We have appeared in three movies. Willie Nelson closed for us on two occasions. A lot of people thought that we opened for him, but I believe, John, that people are oftentimes looking in the wrong end of the telescope.

When Gene Rainbolt turned 90, I foolishly asked him, "Gene, how are you going to celebrate your 90th birthday?" And he said, "Well, you know Jay, I'm glad you asked. I'd like to have a big birthday party. I like Willie Nelson's music, and I want him to come and perform. And we're going to charge people about $500 a head to come."

I said, "To your birthday party?"

He said, “Yes, because we’re going to donate that money to the OU Stephenson Cancer Center. It’ll be a big deal, and we’ll have fun.”

So I had to be a part of the negotiation of getting Willie Nelson to perform at a private birthday party—which I will tell you, he did not want to do. But there is a possibility—and I think the time has now run past the statute of limitations—that I was the chairman of the board of all gaming operations of the Cherokee Nation. And I finally told Mr. Nelson’s manager, “You people play at Indian casinos, don’t you?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Where are you performing before this particular date?”

He said, “We’re going to be in Kansas City.”

I said, “Well, if you come west and you start south, there’s an Indian casino up near Seneca. They may want to hire you for a show. And then the Chickasaws own a casino that’s down near the Texas border.”

He said, “Yeah, we’re going on back to Texas.”

I said, “You know, in between those two Indian casinos is Oklahoma City. And maybe you could do a one-hour show for a birthday party.”

And of course, they charged for it. Mr. Rainbolt paid for it—he paid for everything out of his pocket—but every dime that got raised went to Stephenson.

They said, “Well, we need an opener. We need an opening group.”

And I said, “Well, we’re not going to charge at all.”

So my group opened for Willie Nelson. Although we tell people that he closed for us.

Then when Gene turned 95, did the same thing. That time it was at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum here, and we filled up the

entire great ballroom. We played a lot longer than Willie did. And yes, I've been on the bus. But we did not inhale. We did not.

**JE:** Was Willie fun to be around?

**JH:** I will tell you the truth—he's a lot shorter than I thought he was going to be. And of course, I'm just hired help, so he was mainly—you know, the photographs are phenomenal. Robert Henry, a good friend, you know, they're all armed up, and I think if we went to Robert's home—he's living up in the state of Washington now—he probably has that picture of himself with Willie Nelson, armed up, probably hanging over his fireplace.

I didn't bother to have my picture made with Willie Nelson because, after all, he closed for my band.

**JE:** Yes, he did. But you opened for Hank Thompson.

**JH:** Well, I had gone on to Tahlequah to take the presidency of the bank there. Most of the guys in my group were back in Guthrie. They called me one day and they said the Logan County Free Fair has hired two musicians to do big shows to help raise money to keep the fair going. They knew about our band. They said, "They've asked if we'll open for one of these acts." I said, "Well, who are they?"

They said, "Well, Friday night is Lorrie Morgan." Her husband, Keith Whitley—who, you know, ended his life through alcoholism—was kind of on the rise at that point. I didn't really know her that well, and it was Friday, and I had to work in Tahlequah. I have a real day job.

I said, "Well, who's playing on Saturday night?"

They said, "Some old guy named Hank Thompson."

I said, "He's still alive?"

They said, "Yes, yes he is."

And I said, "You know what? I want to open for Hank. Two reasons: my father, who was a musician—I said he'll be impressed. Number two, Hank Thompson was married to Merle Travis's current wife, and they lived here

in Tahlequah. That'll just be fun."

So I drove back to Guthrie for that Saturday show. And back in the green room, I got to tell Hank Thompson, "I am from Tahlequah."

He said, "Well, you must know Dorothy, my ex-wife."

I said, "Yes. I can't tell you she's a customer of the bank, but I know Dorothy."

He said, "Well, Merle's dead now, but when he was alive, we were husbands-in-law."

And we opened for Hank Thompson that night. He went into the Country Music Hall of Fame about two weeks after that—and we kind of take credit for that.

## Chapter 11 – 10:18
## This and That

**John Erling (JE):** Let me throw out a few names here that you may have brushed up against. Lyndon Baines Johnson—did you ever meet him?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** Meeting him is not the word. Touching him is—yes. I'm in the 6th grade. My mother tells me one morning, she said, "I'm coming to get you at school today early," and she said, "I'll tell your teachers." I said, "Why is that, Mom?" She says, "We're going to Pryor," where she had been raised. I said, "What are we doing there, Mom?" And she said, "Well, you're going to do something that I'm dedicated to. You're going to see a real live United States president." She said, "Lyndon Johnson is going to speak at some dedication up at Pryor." That was the MidAmerica Industrial Park.

She bought a pair of binoculars from the Blackie Blackmore Surplus Store in Siloam Springs, and we loaded in the car and drove to Pryor Creek. Every politician, without regard to party, was at that event, and I think they all spoke. It went on into the evening. I was fascinated that the Kilgore

Rangerettes came and did kind of a kick dance performance, and you know, a 6th grade boy could be interested in watching that happen.

At the end of President Johnson's speech, he walked down this very narrow rope lane and I reached out to be able to shake his hand.

**JE:** How about President Jimmy Carter?

**JH:** Well, Jimmy Carter, of course, was very active in Habitat for Humanity. Tahlequah formed one of the very first Habitat—if not the first Habitat for Humanity—chapters in the entire state of Oklahoma. So, while I'm the president of the bank, Roger Webb, who was the president at that time, calls me and says, "Jay, President Carter's here. He's going to speak at the football stadium. We're going to have a private dinner for him here at the Student Union. I'd like for you to be a part of that." I said, "Be honored."

Well, I'm working at the bank and I looked at my watch—I'm running late. I park at the Student Union. I foolishly put on my suit coat, and as I'm going up the steps of the Union, the top button on my jacket popped right off. I thought, I can't go see the president with a one-button jacket. So, I went into the bookstore and said, "I desperately need needle and thread." All they had was white. I had on a dark blue suit. I thought, better than no button at all.

I threw two baseball stitches on it and noticed that the elevator—which I had known since I was going to school there—was getting ready to close its doors. I also knew it was notoriously slow, so I took a full run to jump into the elevator. And did—to find Jimmy Carter and two Secret Service officers in there.

I entered the elevator car with such abruptness that they both reached into their jackets, reaching for what I assume were weapons. I held my hands up and said, "No, it's OK." And of course, with my freshly buttoned coat, the button popped off my jacket and rolled on the floor. Jimmy Carter picked it up and he said, "I think the button came off your jacket." I still have that button. He's a great man.

**JE:** Let's continue with presidents—Richard Nixon?

**JH:** Well, Republicans are few and far between in my part of the country, but Richard Nixon actually spoke at the Republican Women's Club banquet in Enid, Oklahoma, for Garfield County. I thought, you know what, I think I'm going to go see that. I got paid $25, drove up there, and actually heard Richard Nixon say, "Let me say this about that," and he made several things "crystal clear."

This is in the 1970s, obviously after he's been impeached and left office. But he was still at least revered here in Oklahoma. I was shocked that after the meeting, he was still at the podium and no one was going up to see him. So I went up, shook hands with him, and said, "Mr. President, thank you for coming to Oklahoma." Interesting man. Interesting man.

**JE:** Didn't fully embrace him because he was a Republican president?

**JH:** Well, Garfield County—lot of Republicans up there, and today, John, even more than there was then. It was fascinating that yeah, they invited him to this Republican event to raise money, but it was as though we really, really don't want to be hanging around him after it's over.

**JE:** And then you even made it to the History Channel?

**JH:** Well, the tribe—because of my tribal service—and many of them at the tribe knew that I had kind of a taste for history. Because even when I was running businesses, I would usually start out board meetings with, "This meeting that we're having, the decision we're making today, is very reminiscent of a particular era in history."

I tried to see to it that my board of directors—matter of fact, I forced them—to take the Cherokee history course. We had phenomenal business leaders. Dave Tippaconic, who was the personnel director for Phillips 66, was on my board of directors. I made him go to that Cherokee history class.

So, I was known as somewhat being an armchair historian in the Nation. I got a call one day and they said, "Jay, the History Channel has called us, and they're wanting to look for somebody who knows about the Cherokees' involvement in the Civil War and may be connected to Stan Watie."

I said, "Well, General Watie was my great-great-great-uncle by marriage. It

was his wife who was actually my blood relative. She and my great-great-great-grandmother were sisters. They were daughters of John Bell, who was an intermarried white who actually led a detachment during the Trail of Tears. They also removed to Texas in the 1840s to live in absentia during the Boudinot assassinations."

I said, "Well, give them my number." So this producer called me from Chicago. It was kind of an interview, and I said, "Yes, I do know about Native Americans during the Civil War, and yes, I am a Cherokee, and yes, I am related to General Watie." I went to Fort Gibson, and we sat in a room very much like this—only it was in the log part of the fort—for about two and a half hours, and they interviewed me.

And I discovered that the History Channel is very long on channel and very short on history. When I made the remark about, "Well, after the fall of Vicksburg..." they said, "Now, when was that?" I said, "That was in 1863." And I had to give them all this background.

But the part that I became deeply worried about—at one point we were talking about the fact that the American Civil War among the Cherokee Nation was really just an extension of the Treaty Party and the Ross Party's feud over the removal to what is now Oklahoma and the murders that took place in retribution against the lost lives of Cherokees coming on the Trail of Tears.

I said, "It was sort of an era of like the Crips and the Bloods," and I didn't realize it at the time, but she started nodding her head like this. At the end, she says, "So, Mr. Hannah—Stand Watie. Hero or villain?"

And I said, "Well, that's sort of like asking if Snoop Dogg's a villain," and she said, "Cut." She said, "Thank you so much. We never get any contemporary analogies in this show. Usually, it's history professors with beards and cardigan sweaters."

And then I thought, oh my God—she's actually going to use these lines. I was just kind of quipping. And the night it came out—of course everyone back home knew that Jay Hannah is gonna be on the History Channel—I sat there white-knuckled. And sure enough, they actually used my

statement of comparing the Boudinot assassinations to the Crips and the Bloods. And yes, I'm the only man to have ever likened a Civil War general to Snoop Dogg on the History Channel.

But fortunately, the principal chief—he called me after it aired and he said, "That was pretty fun."

**JE:** Since we are sitting here in the Oklahoma History Center of the Oklahoma Historical Society, we should say that you hold a certificate for Dutch oven cooking.

**JH:** Yes. I believe, John, that really—we're just students in life. And sometimes, even if you know things, you should have a certificate to prove to other people that you do. Much like, I guess, probably the Cowardly Lion or the Tin Man. Sometimes you just need something to prove that you are.

So I enrolled in the Dutch oven cooking course here at the Oklahoma History Center. The lady that was teaching it—there were about almost 30 of us in that class—she had all these ancient Dutch ovens. We all drew the recipe that we were going to cook.

I went to her and I said, "Look, I grew up cooking in cast iron, and I'm really good at savory things—stews and whatnot—but I want to be able to make biscuits in a Dutch oven." She pointed at a particular Dutch oven—it was gate-marked, meaning it was made in the 1800s. She said, "Young man, if you picked up that one, you might have the right recipe."

I was paired with another young lady, and we had a biscuit recipe. So here in the parking lot of this History Center, we rolled out dough, we let it rise, and we made beautiful biscuits in a Dutch oven that was triple-footed and probably 150 years old.

**Chapter 12 – 3:15**
**Most Proud**

**John Erling (JE):** Can you single out something that you're most proud of and that you've accomplished or done in your life?

**Jay Hannah (JH):** I'm a daughter dad. And I've told my daughter, who is adopted—I said, you know, most people go through their life and they just do things and they really struggle with trying to figure out, "Well, why me?" I don't want to go to the poet, but I think sometimes we do ask ourselves, "Why am I here?"

I told my daughter one day on a Thanksgiving flight—she's a phenomenal artist, she's a phenomenal musician. She and her husband live out in Portland. I'd been out to visit and we were flying back here to Oklahoma for Thanksgiving. I told her, I said, "You know, I finally—because of you—I figured out why I existed." I said, "The only reason for me to be here was to be your dad."

I said, you know, it's something very comforting to do a lot of things, but to understand why Unetlanvhi, the creator of all things, sent you to be here... I said, the rest of this is just fun.

I do hope that on my headstone, on Moseley's Prairie at the Johnson Cemetery—where Ezekiel Proctor is buried—that I will have a taller headstone than Zeke Proctor, and that it may say that Jay Hannah lived among his people, the Cherokee, and that he was the chairman of the [Cherokee word], the Constitutional Convention. And I believe that it will still be the law of the land when my morning comes around.

**JE:** What's your daughter's name?

**JH:** Natalie.

**JE:** OK. Is that your only child?

**JH:** It is. You know, we daughter dads can really only afford one child.

**JE:** How fortunate she was to be adopted by you. How would you like to be remembered?

**JH:** As a man who had good intentions and did his best. And was never, never planning to do—in many ways—any of the things that other people would have said, "Hey, look at that." These are not by my own design, and therefore they are not by my own wit or my own skill. I am simply an extended product of the village that I have grown up in.

**JE:** Life came to you. You didn't have a particular goal in mind. Maybe goals along the way, but you didn't grow up wanting to be—"I want to be something."

**JH:** Wish I had. Maybe I would be much richer, and maybe I would have a pickup truck that has less than 239,000 miles on it and a tribal tag. But when I go home, I'm accepted. You don't want to have too fancy a car when you're driving the roads of Adair County.

**JE:** Right. But this has been fascinating, Jay. I really enjoyed it. I know our listeners will find it very interesting as well. And by listening to you, a great history lesson as well. So thank you, thank you. We appreciate it very much.

**JH:** You're very kind. And in Cherokee we say wado, oginali—thank you, my friend.