

Emily Dickerson | *Wild Onions*

Emily Dickerson was the only elder that we interviewed who needed an interpreter. Emily exclusively speaks Chickasaw, so her son, Carlin Thompson, was kind enough to spend the morning with us in her garden. Mother and son are an invaluable resource to the Chickasaw Nation—they strive to keep the cultural traditions alive for future generations.

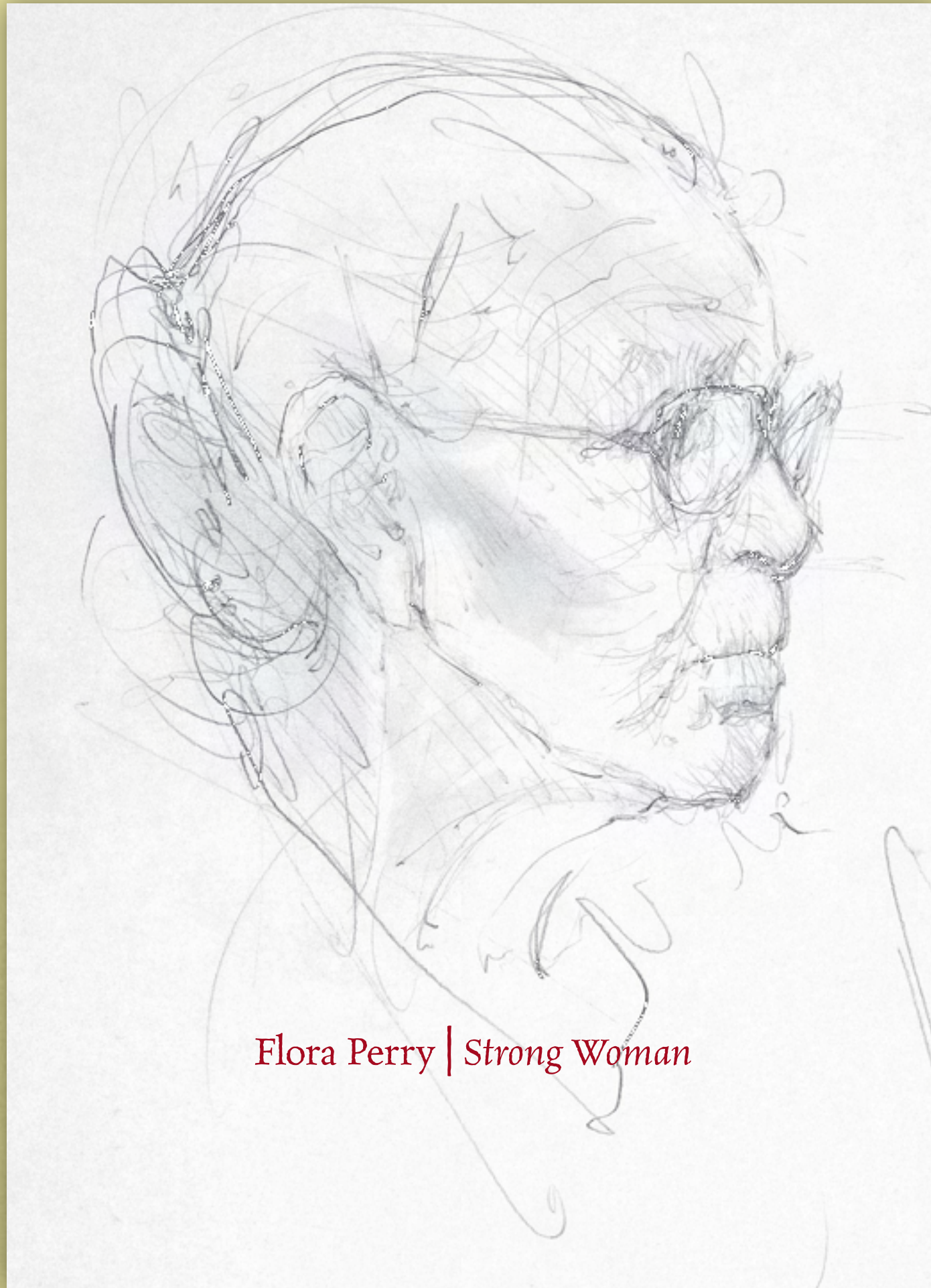
The best part of the whole day was walking through that garden, learning the Chickasaw names of the plants and smelling the wild onions. In late April, it was the perfect day to spend listening to the old names of the vegetables and flowers she loves. Emily has a well-known knowledge of traditional foods and medicines that are important to the tribe. Her experience is sought after and handed down in an act of tribal continuity.

She only asked one thing of us—she wanted us to dance. We would be walking and talking and she would start a little shuffle dance, then point at us and motion for us to dance too. We danced as much as we talked.



Toward the end of our time together, we made our way back around to her front porch. I ran to our car to get a gift for her, and she started giggling. She said something to Carlin in Chickasaw and pointed at me. We asked what she had said, and Carlin told us she called me (Martha) “a pretty white man.” Of course, this is now my Chickasaw name.





Flora Perry | Strong Woman

We drove to Flora's house to pick her up and take her to another elder's house for our interview. She was ready and waiting for us. Headscarf tied under her chin, she marched out of the house, straight to the car, and got right in. This is a woman who knows how to get things done!

Flora was from a family that sent their kids to boarding school. Some families had to be pressured to send their children; however, Flora's family wanted her to go and receive a good education. Knowing that she might not like the school and try to run away, her mother told her that if she did run away from school, she would spank her all the way back. Flora stayed at the school.

As we sat outside that morning, under the shade trees on her friend's kitchen chairs. We heard her story and saw just how strong she was. There are those elders that soften and bend just a bit as they age. Then there are those like Flora who still sat up straight in her chair all these years, even without her mother to correct her. Oh, and she laughed!



The lighting was perfect under the trees, and I got good pictures right away, yet I kept taking more. I wanted to soak in her vitality. Later, back at her home, she mugged for the camera and made sure to send us off with enough happiness to last the day.

