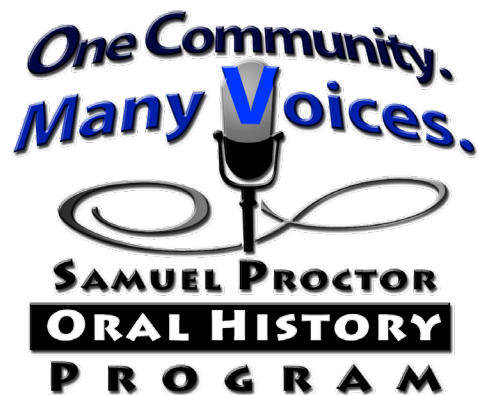


# **Viola Harris Robbins**

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)  
CAT-174**

**Interview by:**

**Emma Reid Echols  
September 17, 1992**



University of Florida • Samuel Proctor Oral History Program • Paul Ortiz, Director  
P.O. Box 115215, 241 Pugh Hall, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-5215  
(352) 392-7168 [www.clas.ufl.edu/history/oral](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/history/oral)

**Samuel Proctor Oral History Program**  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Program Director: Dr. Paul Ortiz

241 Pugh Hall  
PO Box 115215  
Gainesville, FL 32611  
(352) 392-7168  
<https://oral.history.ufl.edu>

**CAT 174 Viola Harris Robbins**  
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**  
**Interviewed by Emma Reid Echols on September 17, 1992**  
**12 minutes | 9 pages**

**Abstract:** Viola Robbins reflects on growing up and attending school on the reservation. She and her husband, Earl Robbins, both make pottery. She shares some of her favorite pieces of their pottery that they have stored in a warehouse, and she explains the process for creating the pieces using an old oil drum.

**Keywords:** [Catawba Nation; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Pottery]

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
**PROGRAM**  
**University of Florida**

CAT 174

Interviewee: Viola Harris Robbins

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: September 17, 1992

E: This is Emma Echols of Charlotte, North Carolina, 5150 Sharon Road. I'm working on the Catawba Indian history with the University of Florida and Dr. Sam Proctor. I'm visiting today in the home of a lady and her husband who make pottery. I am going to let her tell you her complete name, and then we'll ask some more things. Will you tell us your name?

R: My name is Viola Robbins.

E: Viola Robbins. And your husband is?

R: Earl Robbins.

E: And both of them make pottery. Tell me, who was your mother and who was your father?

R: My dad was David Harris. My mother was Maggie Harris, but she was no Indian.

E: But your father was an Indian?

R: Uh-huh.

E: Tell me about where did you live when you were living down here on the reservation. Where did you live with your father and mother?

R: I was small when he died, you know.

E: Yes. But you lived on the reservation?

R: Yeah.

E: Where did you go to school?

R: On the reservation.

E: Tell me who were your teachers. Do you remember any of them?

R: I can't hardly remember.

E: Was that the old school down at the very center of the reservation?

R: Yes.

E: And then later on it moved up near the highway, didn't it?

R: Uh-huh.

E: At first, it was a one-teacher room, and then there were two teachers. Then Arzada Sanders came and made your lunch. Do you remember her?

R: Yeah, but I wasn't going to school then when she made lunch. She made lunch up yonder.

E: Yeah, that's true. What do you remember about those school days?

R: Well, we had a good time going to school.

E: Did you go to school all day long?

R: Yeah.

E: And what did you do for lunch?

R: We'd come home for lunch.

E: And then go back to school?

R: And go back to school.

E: I'll bet you helped the teacher sweep the room and dust and—.

R: I'd clean up in there.

E: Who was your teacher you were helping then?

R: His last name was Hayes.

E: Oh, yeah, Willard Hayes.

R: Yeah, Willard Hayes.

E: That's right. Everybody liked him. I hear so many nice things about him. In fact, I have a picture of some of the children that he taught. Next time I come, I'll bring you that picture to show you. Maybe you're in it. Might be. When did you get married?

R: Well, I've been married fifty years.

E: You have? Long time. What children do you have?

R: I have five children, but I got one dead. I have three boys and one girl.

E: When did you and your husband start making pottery?

R: I started making pottery when I was a young girl. It's been far back.

E: And he's retired now, so he started making, too?

R: Well, he made a little bit when he was young, you know. But now he started making some.

E: He sells all he can make, doesn't he?

R: Yeah, he sells a good bit.

E: And he likes to make big pieces?

R: Uh-huh.

E: Do you like to make big pieces or little pieces?

R: I make small pieces.

E: What's your favorite thing you make?

R: Well, I can make any—I don't know.

E: You make them all.

[Break in recording]

E: Viola Robbins is now taking me back into a big warehouse where all this pottery is stored. I've been up and down the reservation, but I have never, never seen this much pottery in any one place. I'm going to let her pick up one piece after the other and tell you what it is. Viola, pick up one piece, let's see what you pick up.

R: That's a wall pot.

E: Now, she's picked up a wall—a pattern of a wall—a mask of a person. It's beautifully done, even the eyebrows and the little decorations on it. On the back of it, it says, "Earl Robbins, Catawba Indian, 1991." I won't tell you the price of that one. Now, pick up another one, let's see another one. What about this one, the boat? Tell me about—

R: It is a canoe. That's a canoe.

E: Canoe. Did you make some of these?

R: Yes, sometimes. I've got some made somewhere in the room.

E: You make some and he makes some. Now, pick up another kind that he has—any kind you want. Some of them have beautiful shades of gold, orange—

R: This right here is a pitcher.

E: Here's a pitcher that she likes. The name is on it—made by Earl Robbins again. Now, pick up another kind.

R: Well, this is a vase with heads on it.

E: Now, I wish you could see this one. It's a beautiful vase, black at the bottom and then gold at the top. On either side, like handles, are Indian heads. Then coming up the side is, cut in with a nail or something, are little ferns or little trees. And

both sides of it the same, and it's a beautiful combination of gold and black. Let's pick up another piece. What about one of the wedding ones?

R: This is a wedding jug.

E: Tell us, did you or Earl make that?

R: I made it.

E: Oh, you did? How long do you think it took to make that one?

R: Oh, I don't know. It didn't take too long to make.

E: It takes time to shape it and mold it and then fire it?

R: Yes.

E: You do the base of it first?

R: You do the bottom first, and then you put the spouts on it.

E: And then, the last of all, the handles?

R: Yes.

E: So, three stages to make that one?

R: Uh-huh.

E: How long do you think it took you to make that one?

R: I don't even know.

E: Then you had to fire it outdoors?

R: Yeah, I had to fire it outdoors.

E: Do you bake yours in the oven before you fire it?

R: Yeah.

E: That's a beautiful piece. Now, find another pretty one now. Sometimes they are just made for fun, and I think this one is made for fun.

R: This is a horse pot.

E: This is a horse, and it's already marked "sold." It has a cutting in it for the saddle. Did you make that or did your husband make that?

R: My husband made it.

E: Her husband made that one. Who'd you sell this one to?

R: Oh, I don't know who bought this one, but it sold.

E: The marks on it are most unusual. This is the only time I've ever seen a horse.

Let's find another one that you like now. This is a little peace pipe. Did you make it or did your husband make it?

R: I made it.

E: Oh, you did? It's about four inches tall, and there are one-two-three-four little **holes** around for you to put the stems for the smoking pipe. On the bottom of it are three little feet. Wait a minute, you can't buy this one. This costs fifteen dollars—handle it with care, but it's a beautiful little piece. Now she is showing me a gypsy pot.

[Break in recording]

E: Now, gypsy pots were used for their cooking, and they really used this one. It has three feet on the bottom, two little handles to hold by, and she's got beautiful colors, accidentally—that she doesn't know what color it'll be—but it's beautiful brown. I'm just now counting. There are 350 on the right-hand side. There, those are small or medium—a few large ones. On the other side, there are about a hundred great big pieces that will sell anywhere from a hundred to five hundred dollars. There is one with a snake curled around it and vases with their heads on



either side, great big pots that are so expensive. The boats—he likes to make the boats. Of course, he made the horse. Here's another one with the snake wrapped around it; he seems to like to make the snakes, and I believe that's the copperhead wrapped around that one. He has another one down here. Yes, and that's a copperhead, too, wrapped around that one. He makes some beautiful vases. It looks like they would be very difficult to fire. Here's one that is a foot-and-a-half tall, and you can't buy it unless you could give me a hundred-dollar bill for that one because they are very beautiful. Here's another one—ooh, it's heavy. Let's see what it says. "Made by Earl Robbins, 1992." You'd have to give me ten dollars and a fifty-dollar plus on that one. But they are very beautiful and show the artistic skill. He makes his in the early morning and at nighttime. Viola, when do you make your pottery?

R: I make mine in the morning, about 7:00, 7:30.

E: Anytime we find you down here, you'll be down here working. Do you get a great deal of joy out of making it?

R: Yeah.

E: And then you make a little bit of money to sell, also?

R: Yeah.

E: And I see you have a little leaflet over there you are going to give me on the Catawba pottery.

R: Yes.

E: Earl has gone to Rock Hill, and he may be back in a few more minutes. If he does, we'll finish an interview with him.

[Break in recording]

E: Now, we have walked around to see where they're fired. Here's a big oil drum. I suppose several hundred gallons of oil would be in this one time. Viola, what do you put in this drum?

R: We burn small pieces in this drum.

E: Do you heat them in your oven before you fire them?

R: Yeah, yeah. We heat them in the oven and bring them out here and put them in the drum.

E: Are they still warm when you put them out here?

R: Yeah, they're hot.

E: Then your oven is hot out here?

R: Yes.

E: How long do you burn them?

R: About three or four hours.

E: Then you take them out to see how many got broken or how many are perfect?

R: Yeah, we check and see. We wash 'em up and get the dirt.

E: Now, just beyond is a great big boat with three pipes leading up. We'll walk over there and see what this is.

R: This is where he puts the big pieces in.

E: Now, Viola is showing me a great big one. This time, there are three pipes leading up, and this is for the great big pieces. How many pieces do you put in here at a time?

R: Oh, we put—I don't know. We can put a good many in here.

E: You fill it up?

R: Yeah. My son, Bradley, made this.

E: He comes and helps you fire it?

R: No, we do it ourselves. He made this.

E: Oh, he made this?

R: For his daddy.

E: Oh, he made this, and I haven't seen anything like it on anywhere they're firing them. You could put a lot of pottery in here. It's wonderful that he took that interest in making this firing machine, I guess you can call it, for his father.

R: Yes.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Lauren King, December 16, 2021

Audit-edited by: Callum Karoleski, March 24, 2022

Final edited by: Indica Mattson, July 28, 2022