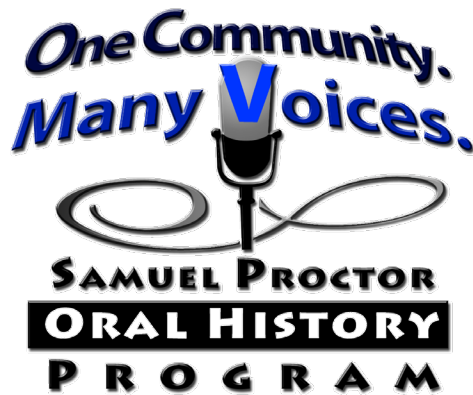


# **W.R. Simpson**

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)  
CAT-021**

**Interview by:**

**Emma Reid Echols  
January 7, 1972**



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**CAT 021 W.R. Simpson**  
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**  
**Interviewed by Emma Reid Echols on January 7, 1972**  
**40 minutes | 17 pages**

**Abstract:** W. R. Simpson is the owner of the only museum in Rock Hill, South Carolina in January of 1972. He built the museum in his backyard, and displayed the Catawba collection that was gathered by his father. Mr. Simpson describes the variety of the artifacts that are located in the museum which include pottery, spear heads, flints and more.

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

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
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CAT 021

Interviewee: W.R. Simpson

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: January 7, 1972

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. This is January 7, 1972. I am visiting in the museum of Mr. Simpson. I am going to let him tell you his name and address.

S: I am W. R. Simpson of 210 Orange Street, Rock Hill, South Carolina. This collection was gathered by my father, who so far as I can tell, started about 1880. When he died in 1924, this collection was packed up and stored. When I retired in 1968, I made it my project to dig this collection out, wash it, clean it up, and put it on display. There being no public museum in this city, I was forced to build this small building in my backyard where I could display all these Indian artifacts and other articles.

E: Tell us about any one that you want. Where it came from or anything about it.

S: These are bones, parts of the skull, the jaw, with the teeth in them, that were washed up from an Indian mound by the flow of the Catawba River in 1901. These are manos and metates, in other words, that is the Indian name for these grinding pots. These are the ones that they ground their corn and their nuts and things in.

E: Did they belong to the Catawba Indians?

S: Yes. Now, of course, this was once solid stone, until he gauged it out. The story goes that the Catawbas were Noles, a branch of the Sioux and the Catawbas would occasionally go back to visit in Canada. They had to walk and these pots were too heavy to carry, so they simply turned them upside down, threw a few leaves and grass right over them, so anybody just passing by would just think it

was another stone. When they came back, they turned it up and there was their pot, and started using it again. We know the Catawbas did not exist only by hunting, but they raised vegetables. They raised maize, which of course just is corn, tomatoes, okra, squash and various other vegetables. These were their hoes. You had to make it and mount it like that. Oh, I'm sorry, this is a pick; the hoe is flat. I can show you more of 'em over there. These are fragments of stone pots, just simply cut out of a solid rock. How they did it, I'll never understand. I guess he had nothing else to do. He had plenty of time.

E: Tell us about all those pipes over there for smoking.

S: The one in the center with four stems is a genuine Catawba peace pipe. The big one over to the right and this one to the left are Cherokee peace pipes. These four, right in front, with the figures on em, them and them, were carved out of silk stone with only another stone as his implement to work with. I think it's wonderful work. These are fragments of old pipes on the sides, and all those in the back, the black ones and the brown ones were more or less modern made by the Catawbas in the last say seventy-five years.

E: What about this old pot?

S: That has nothing to do with Indians.

E: We are going to get something to do with Indians then.

S: This pottery, on this shelf and this shelf, is all Catawba. As you notice, what they make today is real thick. This is thin ... My father had several of the last three full-blooded women make some of this pottery in 1918 so the art would not be lost.

- E: Do you remember the names of the ones who made the pots?
- S: He had written in pencil the name of one of them on the bottom and I traced it over with ink. Made by Martha Jane Harris, Catawba Indians, February 7, 1918.
- E: That's a beautiful pot, golden brown with two tips.
- S: He knew those last three full-bloods would not be there long and he didn't want the art to die. He had 'em make various designs as you can see. Look here. The lady who's making it down there now, there's her picture right back there, cut out of the paper. This pottery is real thick. It isn't quite as fine a work, I don't think, as this. This pottery, that's a different thing. That was dug up while they were digging up the Panama Canal.
- E: What about this arrowhead? Is that Catawba, too?
- S: That is. These are five pieces that were also washed up in that 1901 flood. That's a burial urn. When an Indian died, they buried all his valuables with him. That's what they put him in. This is a water bottle. These things here are to keep the leaves and wasps in here out of 'em. Here are the designs they had started learning to make.
- E: You have any idea how old a burial urn like that would be?
- S: No, ma'am, only having been washed up in 1901, and having turned black, it's bound to be real old. It was originally this color.
- E: That's right. It's dark and black now.
- S: Yes, ma'am. Some of it, in firing it, had black places on it just like that, but that's not solid black.
- E: I heard about the games stones you had down here that you used to play.

- S: The Indians played games with those stones; I don't know exactly how. I think it was something they slid along the ground.
- E: Some of them were round, some were oval.
- S: Right, lots of different designs. I see some have a little indentation in the center. Then all these are axes. They used an axe. You don't see a sharp blade on one; it was almost just a question of just beating the thing into...
- E: Explain the arrow over there.
- S: They didn't use those for hunting.
- E: Oh, they didn't?
- S: No, that was for milling and fighting.
- E: Are those small round stones you have still found on the reservations?
- S: There's a branch down there. You can just go scoop them on up by the bucketful. I don't think that is anything, though, then just a little round stone that was found down in there. You have spearpoints back in there. Down there are more...
- E: More stone pots?
- S: Yes, and over here are some natural stone pots, that one and this one, see.
- E: Now, these were found by your father?
- S: Yes. Not all actually found by him, but by the Indians and the farmers. He was a dentist. Everybody in this part of the country knew he liked Indian artifacts and saved them. So, any farmer who was plowing saw one turned up by his plow, he put it in his pocket and when he came to town on Saturday, he'd bring it to him. He used to take every Thursday afternoon off and he'd take two of us boys and a buggy and go to the reservation. We'd look for things and gather everything

they'd found during the week and saved for him. You see so many different shapes of projectile points, we usually called them arrowheads. The right word is a projectile point, according to archeologists. Each one had its purpose. These with the jagged edge is serrated, so if they shot one of those into a person and you tried to pull it out, you just tore the wound all to pieces and assured death. There were small points for bird and fish, larger ones for animals and men. And these three right here in the center, if you notice they're fluted down the side with a little groove. The story on those goes that a man who shot his arrow, into let's say, a deer, that deer would run. The forest was real thick, and sometimes he'd lose to the deer, which meant his meat, his hide for his clothes, his tent, the bones, the hooves. They used every part of it. These arrows will be gone, so if you can see the idea, a groove down each side of that so that the blood will drip out, that gave him a blood trail to follow. The Smithsonian says those three are either Clovis or Folsom points, as far as they distinguish between the two. They estimate 'em to be from twenty-five to thirty thousand years old. The way the Smithsonian dates them, is out near Folsom, Arizona. The remains of an extinct animal that they knew had not lived on this continent in twenty-five thousand years, one of those points was found imbedded in his ribs. So that's the way they dated those. Now they have more of a carbon dating system now. They can take a piece of rock or anything, it's radio carbon, some way or other it tells you almost the exact age. The pointed one there and the next two and the next two over here are absolutely perfect points. There's not a flaw in 'em. So, I think they must have been ceremonial points, not actually in use, but just used in their

ceremonies. That pointed one is an awl or drill. They used it to punch holes in his hide. To make his tent and his clothes he had to have something to punch that hole through. Here's a little sort of sewing kit, you might call it, some fish teeth with fine points, then a little **coarser**, then rocks on the back.

E: On this side you've got weights for the fish.

S: Down here those are atlatl weights, A-T-L-A-T-L. That's the only way I know to pronounce it. These are spears. When he went to throw that he had a piece of rawhide or something attached to that with this stone on that, which gave more weight. Ordinarily he didn't throw a spear if he was fighting a man, only an animal, cause if he threw his spear at a man and missed, and he was unarmed, he was at the other man's mercy. So, he had to hold onto it and just keep him off for the length of the spear handle. They were also used as weights for fish nets. That one is a maul, like we'd use a hammer. Those two kind of butterfly-shaped ones there behind, they're known as battle stones. The beads—pretty colored beads, red, white, blue and brown and so forth, they are trade beads brought over here by the French and English and traded to the Indians for furs. These are the genuine Indian beads, they're made out of bones and shells, and also used as wampum.

E: For trading purposes?

S: Yes.

E: That was their money.

S: That's right. Here are more game stones. Real small on up to some over there that big around. These are pottery shears they call 'em [inaudible 15:59]



E: What a beautiful design on that piece.

S: Isn't that, though?

E: That's just lovely there.

S: This big flat one right there is a hoe. These are picks, you see?

E: Yes, I see the difference.

S: The one behind it could be called a spade. These little pots are either paint or poison pots. So far as I know the Catawbas never used any poison on their arrows, so they evidently mixed warpaint in those.

E: What would they mix their medicines in? They might mix their medicine in those.

S: I guess the same thing. These things on the end here with the holes in 'em, that's jewelry. They use those hanging from their necks or strapped to their wrist. You can see all sizes and shapes. Those four right there in a row with no points at all, just rounded off, they're called stunners. If he wanted to shoot a small animal, not kill it, but stun it so he could catch it, he'd try shooting it in the head with that, knock it over, stun it for long enough for him to get over there and grab it. Spear points and all shapes of projectile points, so many shapes and sizes.

E: What are those low, long **nile** ones?

S: Those are pestles. Just like our druggist used to use the pestles for mixing medicines and things. That's what those are. One on the right in the back is a ... deer horn. They used the, horns and the bones and everything. These, by the way, these pieces of jewelry, they're called gorgets, G-O-R-G-E-T.

E: That's a new word for me.

S: Don't think I didn't learn a lot when I started with this. [Laughter] The unfortunate part was, it had been packed up so many years, what tags he had on things have just disintegrated. Silverfish had eaten them and all that sort of thing. I had to really do a lot of studying and reading and also use a little imagination trying to get it. I did know quite a bit about it because I was interested in it when he was alive, helped him with it.

E: Did you mount all these yourself or did your father mount those?

S: No, I did these. These are the only showcases I could find, four by two. Well, I got so many thousands of 'em, there was no way to display, I just took plywood and pencil and a ruler and let my imagination run wild.

E: You've displayed them in the form of arrows, and circles, and spheres, and Indian heads, and ...

S: Told my wife the other night, there's one thing I hadn't done yet, that was gotten a place to put it, if I could. The earth was the Indian's mother. The sun was, some considered, the father. If you read in Indian lore, all the way back, everywhere, you see circles mentioned, always. I've got some crescents, and stars. I told her, "What I ought to do is make a sun and a circle." I don't know how I'd come out making the circle. [Laughter]

E: You have simply thousands and thousands of different types of things.

S: Every one of those drawers over there is still full.

E: Of things you have not catalogued yet?

S: No. I've got no place to display all those. That little old coal bin there is not full, but it's up to about that height of scrapers and things.

E: Do many school children come through here to see?

S: I have several, I'd say four or five classes a year. They don't seem to know so much that it's over here.

E: Will you tell me about the Smithsonian Institute? It came and tried to buy this from you.

S: No, the Smithsonian used to send a man here every year. When I was a boy, I can remember the man coming. They would want just certain pieces that they didn't have and they would buy them. Then in later years they started coming—I mean they stopped buying and they kept coming, but they wanted to take your original and make you a plaster cast of it and sent that to your collection. That didn't suit my father at all and it wouldn't have me. But if I had the original, I wanted to keep it. Now, oh I don't know, ten or twelve years ago a representative of the Smithsonian came here looking for a stone. All this was still packed up everywhere and I just told him I was sorry, I didn't have any idea whether we had it or if we did, where we could find it. I finally found what he was looking for was this center one there, that dark black one.

E: I'm glad you didn't sell it to him.

S: No, I wouldn't have even if I had found it. This collection does not belong entirely to me. It belongs to me, my brother, my sister. My third brother died and left his interest to my two boys. There are four of us altogether. We have agreed that it's here for display to school children or anybody else anytime they want to see it, but we will not part with a piece of it.

- E: That's wonderful. Do they have Indians themselves come to see it? I know some Indians who would love to come and see it.
- S: I don't think it was that lady, but one lady came with three or four children. She came, not to see it, but wanted to buy arrowheads to send to Cherokee for them to sell. I just told her I was sorry but I couldn't part with any for any reason and she didn't seem to like it too much and she left sort of in a huff.
- E: You used to go with your father down to the reservation on his day off. Tell me what you saw of the school down there.
- S: There was no school then. That's been many years ago.
- E: No school at all?
- S: No, not that I know 'cause we was just boys.
- E: Mr. Simpson, how old are you now?
- S: I'll be seventy in March.
- E: Seventy in March.
- S: That's been a long time ago. My memory has just completely left me anyways.
- E: Did you ever hear the Indians tell about coming across the river from the Fort Mill area on their flats and in their canoes to trade and to go to school [inaudible 23:50]
- S: I have heard that. I have no evidence of it and never did see it or anything. You see, we had a farm about two miles up the river from the reservation and every summer, the day after school was out, we'd move out there and stay right on the river till the day before school started next fall. It was three months. Course us boys just loved it, we up and down the river and in the woods all the time. We

were digging up what we thought were Indian graves and whatnot. I know my brother and I dug one up and all we found was one sort of homemade nail and one little white button, not even any bones or anything in it. [Laughter]

E: You have a wonderful way of living. What Indians did you learn or know as friends? What ones do you know about?

S: The two Canty brothers, Henry, and I think it was Albert. Our homeplace was next door there and they stayed in our backyard, most of the time, especially every Saturday. They'd come to town and sit around there and wait for something to eat. They wait for dinnertime to come, cause Henry and Albert had the old failing that the Indians have. They couldn't leave alcohol alone. They had no money to buy whiskey, but they'd buy bottles of lemon extract and drink that. I wish you had heard the night before last on the Dick Cavett Show a Mohawk Indian girl. She was real interesting. She's taken a law course, now she's trying to do things for her people. She told Dick Cavett something I hadn't known. We do know that the Mohawks were used in New York and the bigger cities for putting up steel buildings. They have such a fine sense of balance. They're the best steel people in the world. She explained that they had something in their inner ear that White people don't have. She had documented it from some doctor and so forth. Then she went on to the subject of alcohol came up. She said the Indian, lacked something in their system that White people had. They couldn't absorb sugar. That's why they became alcoholics. That girl was smart, she really knew her people's history.

E: These Indian friends that you made in the Catawbas, do you know where any of them are now? As you are postmaster, you probably followed a good many.

S: Well of course, everyone I knew from when I was young is dead. I knew Sam and Nelson, and what's Nelson's brother's name?

E: I think Nelson's brother's dead. His full brother.

S: One of 'em died, that's right. Funny, I can't think. I knew those two and course Sam Beck.

E: And you saw Idle Sanders.

S: I did know those. I haven't had any contact with the Indians in many years. In fact, well I've ridden through the reservation, but it's not a reservation anymore.

E: Now that's the truth.

S: I just hated to see that. I don't know why I always felt sort of like they should have preserved their reservation and their statuses as Indians.

E: Many of them are wishing that they could make pottery and sell it now, and they're wishing that they could preserve it, but you think time is gone, it's too late for that?

S: There's too much White blood in them. That's my opinion. I've got somethings over here maybe—can you hear me from back here?

E: I think we can hear you fine.

S: These are various sizes and shapes and whatnot of spear points and projectile points. These stones here on the second row, with the groove down 'em, were used as shaft straighteners, their shafts were hollow. The thing they cut would

not always be exactly straight so they would heat it, then run it through that and straighten it out.

E: That's interesting. I've never seen one of those before.

S: These are spear points like those on up here. These minerals were in the collection. I don't know the first thing about them at all.

E: They were not found on the reservation, was it?

S: No, that's an amethyst, I know, and here's a petrified wood.

E: When you unpack all the things you have in your boxes and cabinets here, you going to have room to display them here? What are you going to do?

S: I don't know. I just wish I'd built this building twice as big, but it took up nearly all my backyard as it was.

E: It certainly does.

S: These are ... those are all white flints.

E: A whole box full of white flints.

S: Hundreds and hundreds. Here's another one with various colors and shapes and sizes. All these are full.

E: I see you have your work cut out for a long time.

S: I don't suppose I'll ever be able to display those, 'cause I've got no place to do it. I have been advocating, but I'm not getting anywhere, a city museum, where this stuff ought to be. These are more stones, and there's one very peculiar thing about this one—I can't explain it, I don't know if anybody can—that one has a hole, deliberately drilled through it and a pouring spout. What in the world could that have been used for?

E: That's for something that they get juice from, that they have to pour the juice out.

S: I don't know what it was. If you mashed berries or grapes or anything in there, they'll run through the bottom just before you had a chance to pour it out the spout. I just don't know. Thought I'd take pictures from every angle.

E: Now this scalping knife—

S: That's a scalping knife or a saw. It could be used for either. Those are axes that I've mounted to show the children how they were used. These are two genuine bows made by the Catawbias many years ago out of locust wood. They have now become so stiff you can't bend them. These arrows I made just to show the children how they were done.

E: When you spent the summer down on the water of the Catawba River, were the Indian boys playing with their bows and arrows then?

S: No, that was all gone. Now these are course there's some little fish and bird points in there. They had to make everything that they needed. Say a wedge. There's a small one and there's a large one back there. The Indians tried to split a tree or limb to drive that in, like we have 'em made out of steel today.

E: Your father was a dentist. He'd be interested in the medicines them Indians had. Did you ever pickup any ideas about medicines?

S: No, I don't remember.

E: Chief Blue used to make them I know for a fact.

S: He probably did, but we were pretty young and that just wouldn't stick with us, I don't reckon. Here's a case of chisels. They made things out of stone for any purpose they needed. They didn't have them like we would today. You use it by



hand. These are celts or tommyhawks. I mounted these to show the children.

These are hoes and picks, and these are axes. That's the biggest one we've got, five and a-half pounds, and that's a tiny little one, three ounces. I can't imagine why it was made, unless in later years they started working with metals, copper and things. They might have had a thing like that to beat it out. These are known as polished smooth, polished with another rock. These are not. They're just called chip axes.

E: Have you passed this love of Indian lore on to your children?

S: I've tried to get 'em interested. [Laughter] I don't think too much, that's what I wonder.

E: I think your son, the principal out at Lesslie school, is interested in this.

S: He's not got the time to be around it or anything. Here's two cases here. This one are various types. These white ones are white flint and there's two gorgets, one made out of slate and one out of bone. That is a point-blank they call it. If the Indian was travelling, and he was away from home, and he saw a piece of rock that he saw he could make something out of, he would pick it up and carry it home with him then work on it. So that would turn out to be an arrowhead or projectile point of most any size or shape that he wanted to make it. Now these are spearpoints, axes, and celts.

E: Now what do you mean by the word "celt"?

S: A celt is a tommyhawk. That is the largest I've ever seen, thirteen inches long. There may be some larger than that somewhere in the country, but I've never seen one or heard of one any longer than that.

[Break in recording]

S: I'm tryin' to stick strictly to Indian.

E: Have you ever been over in the Fort Mill area and picked up anything over there?

S: No. As I said, I meant to give the impression that, I take no credit for this collection at all. My daddy saved all this. I might have picked up a rock here and there when I was a boy, but nothing of any extent.

E: Part of this was in the Rock Hill Public Library for quite a while, was it not?

S: Before World War II started, I put the pottery, some old guns, and I think that bone and so forth in there. They agreed to furnish showcases and put the whole collection in there. But when the war came along, they couldn't get any more showcases, so it sat there till after the war was over. Then the library boys decided that they wanted the space for books and they asked me if I'd take it out. There was nothing else to do but take it out. This board, all these are strips of quartz. You see a few here that are almost as clear as glass. Quartz was kind of a rare stone.

E: What different kinds of stone did they use?

S: That's what I wish I knew. I wish I was a geologist that knew one stone from another. I know white flint and quartz and that's about the extent of it. These other things, I just don't have any idea what that stone is.

E: You have each one pasted on your mounting board?

S: I glued 'em on. Sometime after I had finished gluing all these on, I read somewhere never glue a rock onto anything. [Laughter]

S: So, I don't know whether it's too late now.

E: You have to have some way of putting it on.

S: Sure, suppose you tried to wire those on, put 'em on sewing thread, you'd never have finished. I've got some over here that are big enough. I could use fine copper wire, but the rest. of 'em I just had to glue on. They've been on there I'd say approximately two years now. I haven't had but two or three fall off.

E: Well, you've got a most interesting collection. I hope all the children in Rock Hill can keep in touch with you.

S: I really enjoyed showing it to 'em. By the way, you're one of the most important visitors. I'm about to forget to get you to sign the list.

E: I'll be glad to sign it. [Laughter]

[End of interview]

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