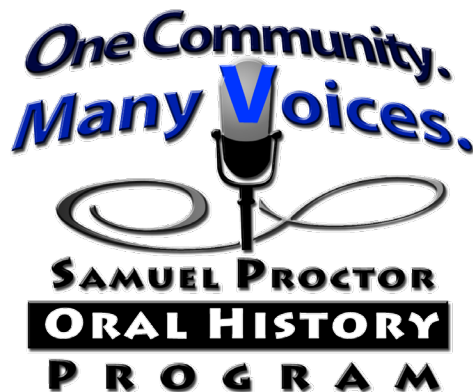


William Calhoun Lesslie

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-082**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
October 12, 1973**



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56 minutes | 21 pages

Abstract: Mr. Lesslie, who lives alongside the reservation, speaks about the way the Catawbas lived their life, what they did for a living, how they prepared food, and their system of leadership. He recalls his experience playing baseball against the Catawbas at the Lesslie School. He remembers Dr. Hill and how he would travel to visit patients. He speaks about the different ferries in the area and about Mormonism in the Catawba community. Finally, he talks about some of the old sites the Catawbas frequented on the reservation.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Dr. Edward Glenn Hill; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Race relations; Mormon Church]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
P R O G R A M
University of Florida

CAT 082

Interviewee: William Calhoun Lesslie

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: October 12, 1973

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. I'm working on the oral history of the Catawba Indians. I'm visiting in the home of Mr. Lesslie. Mr. Lesslie, would you give me your full name?

L: William Calhoun.

E: William Calhoun Lesslie. What's your address?

L: It's Rock Hill, Route 6.

E: How old are you, Mr. Lesslie?

L: I'm eighty-four.

E: Eighty-four. You know a lot of things to tell us about the Indians. Let's go back when you were a little boy. What do you remember about the Indians on the reservation when you were a little boy? Maybe you hunted or played with them?

L: When I was fifteen or eighteen, somewhere along in that age, I went hunting with John Brown, a Indian who was a excellent shot at birds, and he would kill as many as three or more on a rise. That's when the covey waste is flushed. He had one of the best trained dog that I have ever seen, and I never have seen one that was better. He called up Early Brown. You remember Early, don't you? They were living on a square mile of reservation set aside by the state of South Carolina at that time. They lived in small homes.

E: Were they log home houses, or were they just timber?

L: No, they were not log. Practically all of them were just wooden homes built with wood, but they were small, most all of them were. But one of the reasons was that they just didn't have an opportunity to make very much money. They hauled

wood off the reservation to Rock Hill and sold it for burning purposes, for heat. They used that money for a living, partly, and the state of South Carolina appropriated a certain amount. It was divided out among them by an Indian, a Catawba Indian agent. Practically all of them are good swimmers. They live right at the river, you know, and they could swim well. There was two Canty boys, Henry and—I've forgotten his name right now ...

E: Was it Alonzo or Frank?

L: Frank, Frank. In that time, we didn't have a drug addict in this country, I mean in South Carolina at that time. People sold laudanum, I believe it was, and some other things. They got to be addicts to that, and Frank was burned to death in a fire down there. Just a woods fire, a field fire. He was evidently helpless at that time, and that's where he died. I heard he died a natural death. Not too many of them, though, used any of that kind of dope, but that family just happened to be one that did, the mother and the two boys.

E: The White people brought in whiskey and things of that kind.

L: They would go to town, they'd come out here to Lesslie, and—

E: To the store.

L: Yes, into the store and places and buy.

E: What was it like on the reservation in terms of food in those days, particularly the quail? John Brown shooting the quail. There were plenty of quail. What other birds?

L: They fished some, and they were good at it. The Catawba River, at that time, was not polluted as it is now, and the fish were good. I mean you could catch

'em. They would fish and seine, and some put baskets in. They'd catch 'em in baskets.

E: Did the men do the fishing, or did the women do the fishing?

L: The men, mostly. I really don't know about the women. They may have, but the men couldn't get jobs at that time, and they had time on their hands.

E: The Indians lived on this square mile that you spoke of. Tell us about what kind of land it was.

L: The upland part of it was [inaudible 7:59] and native pine, pine trees and [inaudible 8:07] most of it. But it was rocky and poor land all over sides. The river bottom was very fertile, and they even rented some of that to White people that lived nearby. They rented it and got a certain share of their rent. But it was very little that they could get off of the reservation besides wood. They used and sold practically all of it.

E: Did they have any fruit trees of any kind, do you remember?

L: No, none to amount to anything, I'd say. There may have been—I did see a few apple trees in the air. Their roads were just poorly kept.

E: With red clay roads?

L: Red clay roads, practically, and it was a long time before they even got topsoil and good bridges in there.

E: Do you remember the old church or the old schoolhouse, either one?

L: Oh, yes.

E: Tell us the size and what those looked like.

L: The schoolhouse was built more on the long, shotgun-type schoolhouse, and it was not very large because, I don't know why, but they didn't—parents didn't cause their children—most of 'em didn't—to go to school at that time very much.

E: There probably was just one teacher, wasn't there?

L: Yes, usually one teacher.

E: Now, whereabouts is that school located?

L: It was located right—

E: In reference to the old well, let's see, where was it located?

L: It was located close to the old well. Yes, ma'am, it was located close to it. They was two roads crossed, and it was right in there. Well, obviously not in the center of the reservation, but it was practically in the center of the homes in the reservation.

E: The old church was very similar to that. It was also a small little—

L: Yes, it was very small.

E: Do you remember any of the teachers at the school? Who were the first teachers you remember? Do you remember—Mrs. Wheellock was one teacher, then Miss Macie Stevenson was one. The two Lesslies taught for a short time down there.

L: Yes ... Let's see.

E: Well, that's a long time ago.

L: I really don't recall.

E: You mentioned Arthur Wheellock being the famous football player, I believe from Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I believe he had a little trouble with Mr. Brown one day, didn't he?

L: Yes.

E: Tell us about that.

L: Well, the Indians—I don't know as they were any worse than the White people as far as that goes. A certain type of White people would get high on Saturday afternoon, usually, because that would be when they have a little money to buy with the whiskey. He and John Brown both got pretty high one Saturday evening, and into the night, they got into a fight, and John Brown pulled Carlisle—

E: Wheelock.

L: —Wheelock ear practically off, all besides his lobe. They said they put the ear up on the mantel until morning, then called for the doctor and wanted him to sew it on. Dr. Hill was their doctor at that time. And Dr. Hill said that he pretended to be a doctor, but he wasn't any harness maker, and he couldn't sew that on and make it stay. [Laughter]

E: Tell us more about Dr. Hill. I believe he traveled first of all in horse and buggy.

L: Yes'm. He traveled in a horse and buggy a long time. Finally, he got a—I believe it was a Model-T Ford, I think it was, that he used for a long time. Dr. Hill was not a man that was easily excited or didn't seem to have fear. He was down at the reservation at different times. They would have fights, but Dr. Hill, he didn't run off. He stayed. [Laughter] He stayed right there. Dr. Hill was really a smart doctor in his day. He went one time as a witness in York on some case, and he testified about a blow to the brain. Some other doctors there that didn't know him wanted to know who he was and how he knew about the different parts of the anatomy. He was really a smart man. He did drink some. At that time, practically all of the

doctors had patients near where they could go see 'em, and he had plenty of practice to make a living.

E: Did he come lots of times at night to treat the Indians or spend the night with them?

L: Oh, yes'm, the doctors at that time did a lot of the nursing. We didn't have nurses in this country. I believe even the White people didn't have nurses. They would stay and give them the medicine and watch the results.

E: He carried his own little bag and mixed his—

L: He carried his bag with him, yes, ma'am. He had medicines with him, and they didn't have many of the medicines we have today.

E: Did you ever see his little bag of surgical instruments? I understand he had one little long black bag he had his surgical instruments in and another little bag that he had his medicines in. Did you ever see his surgical instruments?

E: I never have seen all of them. I've seen him using some but on people who were warned especially. I remember a patient had what they call a carbuncle on the back of his neck, and it was a fierce-looking thing. He lanced it, and I witnessed that, but I never have just seen the whole bag of it. I mean he had it, but he just took out what he needed.

E: When the Indians would need him, they would have to go in a wagon or horseback to get him, wouldn't they? There would be no telephones at that time.

L: Yes, ma'am, that's right. That's the way they went. Some of them would work their doctor bills out, too. I believe it was Frank Canty that went over to Dr. Hill and plowed his garden for him. He was plowing Dr. Hill's horse. The horse

stepped on his vegetables and things like that, and Dr. Hill said, "Frank, don't let that horse step on my vegetables." He talked to him a time or two like that, and Frank said, "Take your old horse. The debt is settled."

E: The debt is settled.

L: Yes. [Laughter] "You take your old horse. The debt is settled." That was one little instance.

E: What other Indians do you remember down here? You mentioned the Cantys and the Browns. What other Indians do you remember?

L: Blues, and there was some Owls down there one time. Now, I don't know whether any of them are there now.

E: No, there's some that are buried in the ancient cemetery, and the Owl family is a very prominent family up in Cherokee.

L: Yes.

E: Tell me what you remember about the Owl family. I'd like to hear.

L: I really don't know anything especially about them, but I just knew that they were there, and I—

E: What do you know about Chief Blue?

L: Chief Blue? Chief Blue was the leader of the Indians for a number of years. They elected him as Chief, and he guided them through a time when they needed someone to look after their interests: getting money for 'em from the state and things like that, and then just general supervision. In the reservation, they had practically their own laws of what they should do and what they didn't, unless it

was a murder or something. The White officers didn't go in for just minor things. They got through their Chief and in meetings. It worked very well, I thought.

E: I'm sure you've heard him do his war dances or his yells, haven't you?

L: I've heard him give his yells, yes'm. I heard one of the older Indian women one time. She was with Sam Blue. She could speak some of the Indian language. Of course, I couldn't understand any of it, but she could. I'm trying to think of who she was. I believe ...

E: He had a wife and a sister, I believe, who both spoke the language.

L: Yes. When the settlers first settled here, they had to use their language of their own. But they soon got to where, talking with the Whites, they could use the English language, more or less. They just found that the Indian language just faded away because everybody was speaking English, all of them.

E: Did you ever hear them sing in their language? The chants?

L: No'm, I never have, no.

E: Mr. Lesslie, you've seen so many changes over here. Do you remember any of the Indians that lived around Lesslie? Do you remember any of the ones that worked on the Neely's Creek Church, for instance, as carpenters?

L: I know there was some, but I don't really recall their names right now.

E: A good many of them were carpenters, I know. Tell me about, did you see the pottery? Did they ever come by trying to sell pottery to your—?

L: Yes'm, they did that. The pottery was made. They didn't have any—it was baked in stoves, I understand, wasn't it?

E: In the fireplaces, like an open fireplace. Around the side of an open fireplace.

- L: In the fireplace, yes'm. Most of it had smoke on sides of it. It was nice work, I thought.
- E: Do you remember the prices that they charged at that time?
- L: It was very small.
- E: Those were hard years for the Indians to get food and clothing and so forth.
- L: Yes.
- E: How did they live? Was there any way they could make a living?
- L: Oh, they managed. Some of them worked outside the reservation, but they didn't have jobs in Rock Hill until later. There's so many of them now work in the Rock Hill industry. They make good money now, but at that time, it was just—they had a hard life.
- E: They were never farmers. They didn't do much to raise their own—
- L: They didn't do much farming, no. They raised a little, some of 'em.
- E: You never went to school with any of them. They all had their own private school, didn't they?
- L: Yes, I never did go to school with any of them.
- E: Did you ever play games with them, ball with them, anything like that with them?
- L: Oh, yes. We used Lesslie school at one time, and the Indians played baseball. They'd come to Lesslie school and play one game, and we would go to the reservation and play another. Neither one of us had good baseball fields. Most of it was in pastures, just temporarily laid off, but we had a good time playing the game. Some of the Indians were good at it.
- E: They could at least run fast, couldn't they?

L: Oh, yes'm. They could run fast.

E: Do you remember any of the names of any of those Indian boys you played baseball with?

L: Bill Canty was one, and Early Brown, and—

E: Alfred Harris, was he one of them?

L: Yes'm, he was one of them. I just don't recall many of them. But they were— along about that time, they were beginning to mix, I mean associate with the Whites and the Whites with them, more and more. I reckon you heard the saying about the Indians way back, how they classed these people. They said the Indian and the White man and the Indian's dog and the nigger.

E: Oh, that's the way they—

L: That's the way they classed 'em.

E: Mr. Lesslie, in this community then, there were Indians, and Blacks or niggers, and the Whites. How did the Indians and the niggers get along, or did they have any connection?

L: Well, socially, they didn't have any meetings at all that I've ever heard of, but out just working and things like that and being [inaudible 29:54] considered the Indian a little better, but they were not—they treat them very well.

E: Now, the three schools in the community: There was the White school, the school for the Negroes, and the school for the Indians. Which was the poorest of these schools? How would you rate them?

L: Well, at one time, the Indian school was the poorest, and then they got the new school, and it was better than the nigger school at that time. But they all sort of

improved now, and we really don't have any nigger school, but we have settlements of niggers, and—

E: You've never known the Indians to intermarry with the Blacks?

L: No, ma'am, never.

E: They had separate churches, separate schools, and everything was on a different basis.

L: Yes.

E: You've seen so many changes. Now, what was the relationship of the Indian and the White man? Did the White man treat him honestly in selling him produce and that sort of thing?

L: I would say, at one time, when the Indians were so hard up that the White man would—the storekeeper, he had to know who to credit because the average Indian would buy, and chances are he would never have the money to pay him, and in that way they lost. Mr. Ed Neely sold to the Indians for years, course his store was right near the old reservation. But he knew who to credit and who not to credit, and he got along very well. There were some of them at that time that would buy anything most from anybody if they could get it on credit. But I don't really blame the Indians so much for that because they were under the White man's rule, and they were treated bad in lots of ways—the White man didn't think he was better than an Indian, but in dealings, they had to watch what they were doing.

E: During the flu epidemic, the whole community was hurt. Do you remember whether the White people did anything to help on the reservation?

L: Well, yes'm. I do know some—one instance. Back—I don't know the year—but it was a severe winter, and there was snow on the ground, and people didn't have anything to eat, and some of the White people told the Indians to cut wood, just regular cordwood, and they did, and they went through that spell just from cutting the cordwood. At that time, they were using cordwood for [inaudible 35:17] and firing engines and things like that.

E: Do you remember the flood along the Catawba River and what the Indians did during that time?

L: 1916?

E: That's right.

L: Yes'm. I remember the flood—

E: I think the Indians had to ferry some of the White people across the river.

L: Yes'm, they had to do that because, in that [19]16 flood, it took all the bridges from—even the railroad bridges from up in North Carolina, all through this section, there were no bridges. You know, there was a bridge along the end of this road, they called it the Roddy Road then because Mr. John Roddy got it started. And it was just above the reservation, and it was a shortcut to Charlotte. But it went down in that river, and it was never built back. It was knocked so far off of Ms. Lawrence's home, if you know where that is. But they did ferry. They used flats and carried cars or wagons or whatever across the river. The Indians were good at that. A number of 'em would run ferries at different places.

E: Do you remember the different ferries? There was an Upper Indian ferry right near the reservation, I suppose, and then there was what they called John

Brown's Ferry, the Catawba, and then there was Cureton's Ferry. Is that the way they were listed to you?

L: Cureton's Ferry was on below [inaudible 37:39] They ran it for a number of years, some of the Indians.

E: What sort of trail would there be from the reservation down to John Brown's Ferry? The trail, would it be along the riverbank, or would it be up on the—

L: Well, no'm, it was on high ground because when they had big rivers—which we all had then before the dams were built along the Catawba to control the water—they would have to pull the ferry out as the water rose and then let it go back as the water went down. They couldn't use those ferries in extremely high water. They finally had motors on 'em, and they had cables across to guide the ferry.

E: The first ferry you went across on there would be a ferry that would be just poled across, now, wouldn't it?

L: Yes.

E: And then they had it motorized with the cable.

L: Yes. I don't know ... Mr.—they called him Mr. **Gum** Caldwell. He built that [inaudible 39:40] for practically all of the ferries that I know anything about. He would build them right near where they would be put in into the water. And at that time, the Indians would take it over to run the ferry. At that time, I was working on dirt roads in the country; this one was one of them.

E: And did you have any Indians to work on the highway with you?

L: Yes'm. Bill Canty worked with me, and he was exceptionally good at fine grading. He had excellent eyesight, and he could cut a grade. He worked for me, and then he worked for the county a good while.

E: Is Billy Canty still living?

L: No, he's dead. He was an excellent worker with a machine; he could even do a hammer machine. What I was fixin' to tell you about the ferries: We pushed the flats, just slid it down, pushed it with tractors, and put it in—because we were working the roads at that time, we would go where it was necessary to do it and push 'em in and sometimes pull 'em out. But if there's no high water or anything, and something went wrong with the ferry that had to be repaired, we would put chains to it and pull it out.

E: And you also had to keep that road leading down to the river in good shape, too, didn't you?

L: Yes.

E: Do you remember what fares they charged a person to cross the river?

L: It was very little.

E: Twenty-five cents, or somewhere along there.

L: Twenty-five and fifty cents, along there, was the first price. They went up on it later, but it was very cheap.

E: Since you worked the roads, I guess you took great pride in seeing, finally, a paved road put through the Indian Reservation, didn't you?

L: Yes'm, I did. I sure did.

E: It's been a big boost, a big change.

L: The road, it turns to your left right at Chief Blue's home, just below his home. It was one of the main roads back when there were just dirt roads, and I think they've paved it, haven't they?

E: Yes. They paved the whole—all around that circle, they paved it. Well now, if you had to summarize what you think about the Indians as a Tribe or a group of people, how do you think the Indians got along with the White people, and what do you think of the character of the Indians?

L: Well, I think that the Indians were treated poorly by the White people for a number of years back. And so far, socially, the White people and the Indians got along very well without any trouble, but the Indians at that time didn't have ways of making a living, and it was hard times for 'em. Later, they got jobs in the cotton mills in Rock Hill and got along well, and at the present time, they're doing well, and I think treated well by the White people. I know all that I know anything about were. The Mormons came in back—I don't know what year—but they came into the Indian Reservation. The other White denominations didn't think very much of it at the time, but I think that the results were good because the Mormons, they are trained. So many of the Indians came from Catawba would go to the Mormon Church I believe is in—

E: Salt Lake City.

L: Salt Lake City, Utah, and train there for two years, I think it was. All that they did, it was without cost so far as money was concerned; they did some work and things like that. But the training was good, and then they spread out. Back at the first, the Mormons had two or more wives at that time—some of 'em did, ones

that could afford it—but that would soon drop. I think the Mormons really helped the Indians on different reservations, and they really have a choir out there, don't they?

E: They have a beautiful choir.

L: But their training out there helped because they could go out and help others after they were trained.

E: Well, it certainly seems the Indians and the Whites get along very well in the community now.

L: Yes. Yes'm, they get along very well now.

E: And they seem to—if there ever was any bitterness, I'm sure, the Indians seem to have forgotten it.

L: The White man and the Indians both have forgotten, and after the Indian got jobs and prosperity and everything, and he didn't have to depend on the White man just for gifts and things like that, they got along well.

E: Mr. Lesslie, you remember Mr. William Simpson, the White man who used to visit down on the reservation. Tell me about that.

L: His father, Dr. Will Simpson, he was a dentist. He gathered any relics of the Indians that he could get, and by the way, he talked me out of the only tomahawk that I ever had.

E: Oh, really?

L: And it was nice one. I found that myself, just by accident. It had split a tree and had a ring around it, and the small tree would grow around that, and then they'd cut off both ends and have a handle for it; that was the type [inaudible 49:37] that

they used then. Dr. Will's son—you know, one of them lived back over in there, not so far from the reservation. They had played with the Indians and were very friendly with them.

E: Mr. Simpson must have collected quite a lot of things.

L: Oh, he did. He would talk you out of anything. [Laughter] They didn't pay for things then, Ms. Echols. I mean, relics like that—

E: Did you ever have arrowheads and things of that kind?

L: Well, listen, I've had some nice ones of that. Me and my granddaughter—she spent a week with me this past summer—we heated some rocks and were going to try and make an arrowhead, but we didn't succeed, but we did do one thing. We got one or two of them hot enough, but we didn't get the others, and we would take just a little pointed stick and dip it in water and put it on that rock, and it would pop off a piece. And that's the way that we've always heard that the Indians made those arrows: by heating it—they knew what temperature you ought to heat it—I didn't; we just experimented with that. I've often heard that was the way that they made those arrows. You could see it looked like it was just chipped off, and they say just put a drop of water on a real hot rock.

E: That's real interesting. And there were different kind of materials used in the rocks, too.

L: Yes. Maybe the prettiest ones, the neatest ones that I've ever seen, they were small; now then, there were larger arrows, too.

E: Were those really called bird points, were they not?

L: Yes.

E: Did you ever see the Indians use those?

L: No. I never have seen 'em use it, but I found a number of 'em, and I don't have them now. I don't know what really became of 'em.

E: Was there any certain place in this community that you found more than others?

L: Yes'm. There's a place, it's on the—my father's old place is right near the Hopewell Cemetery, and in that field, they're all piled up on years and years of plywood, some of 'em. I think it must've been an Indian camp there in the early years, when they would just roam from one place to another, because there were so many arrows that were found there, and I suspect they are there yet. I wanna go over there and look at it some of these times. Mr. McFadden plowed it with a plow that would go deeper, with one of those big tractors, and I wanna go over there and look and see can I find some other time.

E: Now, that isn't too far away from the old rock spring. Tell me about that rock spring the Indians used to use.

L: Well, it was a—water came up through a crack in a rock; it was just a crack. I imagine that crack was made along just by freezing in the winter, I think. Anyway, the water just shot up about three or four inches, and it was a very strong stream of water. It was supposed to be one of the places where the Indians got their water.

E: Mr. Boyd tells me that that was also a mineral stream, that some people used that water to drink for mineral purposes.

L: Well, I know that some did do that. I don't know what the mineral content it had, but it was cool. It was cooler than normal water, well water.

E: It's really interesting that the camp—where you think the Indian camp is— and the old spring and that great big rock where they prepared their corn is within about a mile, mile and a half from each other. So, I reckon it must have been a whole—

L: I imagine—yes'm, I imagine it was.

E: Did you ever see any of the old mallets that the Indians used to prepare their corn with? Did you ever see them preparing their corn?

L: No'm, I never have seen that. Well, they taught the White man how to plant corn, fertilize it—they put fish onto it—and they made good corn that way, and that was the beginning of the use of fertilizer.

E: The Indians have taught us a lot of things, haven't they?

L: Oh, yes. Yes.

[End of interview]

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