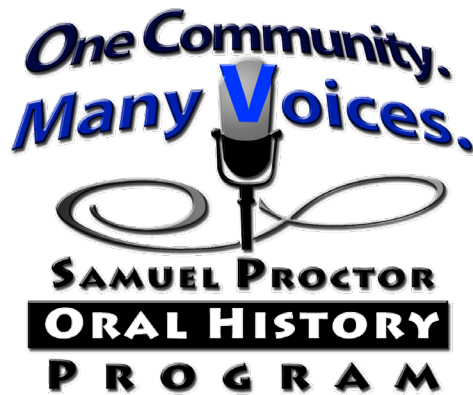


John S. Simpson

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-164**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
November 5, 1985**



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20 minutes | 13 pages

Abstract: John Simpson has lived near the Catawba reservation for most of his life. His brother and two nephews live nearby, all on land bought by their family during the Depression. At eighty-one years old, he and his brother are the owners of his father's collection, which includes remains of pottery and arrowheads found around the nearby rivers. Simpson speaks about a great flood in the area that took out multiple bridges and cars, and that came up so high it touched the underside of houses settled on top of hills.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Oral biography; Natural disasters]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

CAT 164

Interviewee: John S. Simpson

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: November 5, 1985

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. I am recording the oral history of the Catawba Indians, November 5, 1985. Your name is Mr. John S. Simpson, and you're Route 3, Rock Hill. Now how old are you, Mr. Simpson?

S: Eighty-one.

E: Eighty-one. And so, you've got lots of memories of the Catawba Indians. Tell me about when you, your father, and mother used to bring you all out here in the summer.

S: As soon as school was out, he built this cabin down there on what we called Lilly River. It's a forty-acre island down there. And we'd come down here and spend the summer down here. Just fishing and running up and down the river and everywhere else. Then, when the flood come, it washed that island just as clean as this floor. There wasn't a tree—far as I remember, there wasn't a tree left on that island. And I found some of the finest spearheads that my daddy has in his collection over there where the road had washed up. And that water—this cabin we had was on a high hill. That hill must be seventy-five to eighty feet above the river. And that water come up under—we had a—Daddy had a big porch. It must have been twenty or thirty feet wide, the length of the whole cabin, out over the hill like that. And the water come up underneath that.

E: What kind of things did you find when the water finally went down?

- S: Well, we found a lot of shreds of pottery and a good many arrowheads over there. And I found some of the finest spear points my daddy had in his collection over there as it washed up.
- E: What destruction did you see on the river? Did you see houses, or cotton, or anything going down?
- S: Oh yeah, I saw houses go down, cotton go down, big oil tanks go down, everything go down.
- E: What about the loss of life?
- S: Around here there was no loss of life, that I know of, that I ever heard of. No loss of life. Now there may have been some seems like I have heard that up in North Carolina there might have been some loss of life. But, as far as I'm concerned, I have never heard of any.
- E: Did the waters come and affect the places the Indians lived?
- S: Not back over here, when they was on the reservation. I don't think it affected them.
- E: I've heard, and I've seen pictures after the bridge was washed away, did you see that destruction around the bridge?
- S: I saw the bridge wash away.
- E: Oh, you did?
- S: Mmhm.
- E: That was a huge bridge between here and Charlotte.
- S: No, between here and Lancaster.
- E: Yeah, and Lancaster.

S: It was right across the old hill place here. The road went right through that, that's Bowater now. Bowater the seed orchard.

E: Yes.

S: That road goes right across there. The old pillars of the bridge are still out there in the road, as far as I know.

E: Yes. Then, how did people get from here across the river? Did they have boats or what?

S: They had to go down to the Indian ferry and go across.

E: And who—the Indians would take them across?

S: I believe, there was an old Indian that run that ferry, I'm not sure.

E: John Brown?

S: I believe it was. Run that ferry.

E: They didn't cross where the bridge—?

S: No, no, way down.

E: Way down.

S: Way down below Catawba Junction, down there they took the ferry run.

E: Well, if you spent the summers out here, you played around with some of the Indian boys?

S: No, we never did see them.

E: Never did see them? Did they ever come to your house to swap or to sell their pottery of the area?

S: They used to come to the house up home to Daddy's office. They used to bring him stuff up there, bring him arrowheads and stuff. I remember one time I went to the house and there was two barrels full of arrowheads.

E: That was at your father's house in Rock Hill?

S: Yeah, old arrowheads that were cracked and broken, no good. I remember there were two barrels full of them. They used to bring their arrowheads up there to him, cause he'd—if they had a tooth ache or something he would pull a tooth or something for them. Never charge them, always didn't charge them. Then just, back then, he got a chicken for pulling a tooth or a dozen eggs, something like that. That is about all you got.

E: That's right.

S: Dentists don't do that now.

E: Now, his office was almost where Belk's store is today, in Rock Hill, isn't that right?

S: That's right. Rock Hill.

E: There's a newspaper account of a little Indian boy who wanted to go to school in Carlisle and your father hid him in the office. Tell me about that.

S: I don't know anything about that. Just what you've heard, is all I have heard.

E: You don't have any idea who that Indian boy was?

S: No, I don't.

E: That's a fascinating story because your father **Ebony** hid him in the office.

S: He hid him in the office. I know that. I've heard him say he hid that Indian boy in the office.

E: And the father and mother were searching up and down the streets to find their boy. Do you have any idea how old that little boy was?

S: No.

E: Now, late that evening, the train was coming through Rock Hill headed north, and then your father would take that little boy down and put him on that train.

S: I don't know, that was before my time. I was just a little kid at that time, and I don't remember. Now, my brother might know.

E: Well, I've seen the newspaper account and it doesn't give a name and I've never heard it. But that little boy was determined to get an education and I suppose he got it.

S: I never did know who it was or anything about it.

E: Now, where your house is, what lands around here belonged to your father? How much land did you all have?

S: My father bought this land down here from an old man, McGuire, and then during the Depression when Mr. [inaudible 7:30] lost all his place and my brother was in the real estate business, and he bought where I'm sitting here and where Miss Turner lives over yonder. He bought all of that. This part back in here, where my nephews live, back in there, he bought all of this for nine hundred dollars.

E: How many acres would that be?

S: It must have been a couple of hundred.

E: Nine hundred dollars?

S: Back in the Depression, in the [19]30s, nine hundred dollars was a fortune. It was a fortune!

- E: That was. Now, how many acres do you have on your place here?
- S: I've got approximately thirty acres here. And my brother and myself and the two nephews, we own that over there. We got—I think it's about two hundred ninety-something acres down here.
- E: Well, you have no fear that the Indians will ever take your land away from you, do you?
- S: I'm not even—it doesn't even worry me. My nephew down there, it just—he just—it worries him to death.
- E: Yes.
- S: It just worries him still. I told him a thousand times, I said, "They ain't gonna come take your place." He's so scared, he's scared they're going come and take his place. I said, "It'll never be settled in my lifetime, anyway."
- E: That's right. Well, I don't think it's going to be settled in mine either. [Laughter] They are still talking about it, still writing about it, but I do not think it'll ever be settled.
- S: I hear it's coming up on the sixteenth of December. They're gonna take it to the Supreme Court and see if they can sue.
- E: That's right. Now when you were a little boy growing up in this friendship community, the Whites, and some Blacks, and the Indians all there, what was it like? What did you do, what was the farming?
- S: Well, my daddy had sharecroppers down there on the farm. See, we lived in town, and Daddy had sharecroppers down there and we'd come out maybe on Thursday afternoon. He'd take Thursday afternoon off, and maybe we would

come down Thursday afternoon or something like that and just look around.

Then...

E: Then in the summer you'd come and live out here the whole time?

S: That's right.

E: Did you have a garden?

S: No, we didn't have any garden.

E: Did you get to know any of the little Indian boys?

S: No.

E: You didn't get to know any of them. What Indians do you know out here, now?

S: I don't—to tell you the truth, Miss Echols, I'm one of these people who—I try to spend my time tending to my own business and not messing with anybody else's.

E: That's a good way.

S: And I go up into Harry Neale's a lot of times and I say, "Harry, who is that fellow?" He says, "That's a Indian so-and-so." I say, "Well, I do not know him. I don't know any of them." I used to know an old Indian that worked for the county, Bill something, I don't know what his last name was. That was the only Indian I really knew. But I used to do a lot of work for Mr. Earl Glasscock, when he was with the county, and I knew old Indian Bill, when he worked when you could get him sober enough. [Laughter]

E: Lots of Indians on the reservation drank, didn't they?

S: That's right. Old Canty's ... oh, what was his name? They were the—as I understand it, the last full-blooded Indians, old Henry Canty.

E: A good many of the Cantys left, now descendants of Henry Canty and they are all up there—they're talented in making pottery and they're smart. They had to struggle to get an education, though.

S: Now, old Henry, he was just more or less a drunkard, well as I can remember. He was just more or less a drunkard.

E: Do you collect—have you kept any of the old Indian pottery, the old Indian arrowheads? Or does your brother have all of it?

S: All of it. I didn't keep anything.

E: When I go down to see him, I'm going to get him to show me some of the things that you used to have.

S: I doubt if he knows, 'cause I'd just take them and give them to my daddy and that'd be it, you know.

E: When you were out here in the summertime, what church did you attend?
Friendship Methodist?

S: No, we go to an Episcopal church.

E: The Episcopal.

S: My mother was Episcopalian, and she raised us all in the Episcopal Church.

E: Now, the Indians had their own church—

S: That's right.

E: Quite different from the rest of them and they never attended any of the churches down here, I don't think. Did you ever know any of the people who taught on the Indian schools?

S: I think she's dead now, though, what was her name?

E: You knew Mrs. Dunlap?

S: Sarah Jones. Sarah Jones married—

E: Robinson.

S: Robinson.

E: Yes.

S: Sarah used to teach there.

E: And Mrs. Cornish was another one who taught there. Then they moved that school on up to the top of the hill where that old church was. The Indians have completely done that school over. It's nice looking now.

S: They have built a beautiful church down there, haven't they?

E: Yes, sir. They had a lot of help.

S: Oh, yes. No doubt about that. I know the contractor and he told me that when they finished the church, they wrote a check for it and that was it.

E: How much do you think that church cost?

S: I think it was a hundred and something thousand, wasn't it?

E: I don't know, it seems to be more up in the millions.

S: I didn't know that there were that many members down there.

E: They told me that the money came from Salt Lake City, out west.

S: Yes. Well, I didn't know that there were that many members down here.

E: There's not that many members. But then there's this big, beautiful church up on the Chester Highway. Highway 72. It's almost exactly like this one. Well, there's still some fine persons among the Indians. The only trouble is that the old ones that I used to know are gone.

- S: That's right. This crowd now, I don't know any of them. I don't know any of them. Because to tell you the truth I just stay here and tend to my own business. I go to town two or three times a week and stay up there and come home. And as far as I go is down to my nephew's house and back, that's about as far as I go.
- E: Well, people know you around here that you're a friend. I had no trouble in finding you this afternoon. The most interesting thing you told me is about that flood on the Catawba River. It must have destroyed all the crops, all the way down, didn't it?
- S: Well, all the bottom land. It just took all of that. And down here at the Kayler's, down there where the bridge was, there was a big eddy in the river. It just went around like this, and there was sand piled up there. I expect that the sand was fifty to one hundred feet deep. It's still down there, and I think during the war, Cliff **Tunny** told me that they hauled sand out of there for a long time down there. The curve of the river just followed a kind of a eddy. And it just, all of that bottoms down there just covered it with sand.
- E: It was several years before that bridge was completed to get traffic going the other direction over towards Lancaster.
- S: Well, they never did put this bridge back. Cliff told me, said during the war some outfit come down there and got steel out of the river during the war. I wasn't here then, I was in the Navy.
- E: Now, there was a railroad bridge also, was it not swept away?
- S: I think the railroad bridge was up above Rock Hill up there, the railroad bridge. Right below, below the 21 bridge in Charlotte. Somebody told me that they

pushed a bunch of freight cars on the bridge to try to hold it down. They said the bridge and those cars are still down in the river. I don't know how but that's what I heard.

E: Now that was a time of destruction everywhere.

S: Everywhere. Did you see up in North Carolina, they've got the same thing today?

E: Having a big flood there.

S: A big flood up there.

E: Well, I'm really glad to have met you.

S: Glad to have met you as well.

E: And that was interesting about all those arrowheads underneath your father's home in Rock Hill.

S: I don't know where they was coming from, school kids used to come and get them and bury them all over.

E: Did your brother say what he is going to do with all the things he's got in that little house of his?

S: Miss Echols, I have been trying to talk to him and these two nephews I've got. We're both getting old, he's about eighty-four, eighty-five. And I'm eighty-one and we ain't going to be here long. What I want to do is put that in a nature museum out there somewhere now, while we're still living. He had talked to that lady that was out there. I forgot—she's left here now, I understand. She was going to try to make arrangements. In other words, put the cases up there and give us keys for them. Now, at one time, they wanted to just put tables, and us put the stuff on the tables. You know how long that would last.

E: That's right.

S: He wouldn't consider anything like that.

E: Your family has a very valuable collection, the finest one in Rock Hill.

S: Well, I think so. We've got Jefferson Davis's bible there, signature in it, and a letter from Jefferson Davis there, that old piano there. My mother wrote a manufacturer in England, and I don't know whether you saw that letter that she got back from them. They destroyed the records every hundred years and didn't know how old it was. Some of my—some of her people brought that from England, that old piano.

E: You've got a wonderful heritage back behind, things to be proud of. You have two nephews living, Bill and—

S: Bob.

E: Bob.

S: Bob is [inaudible 19:21]

E: Well, I know your nephew Bill, and I know your brother quite well. When I go visit them, I am going to pick up the threads and add some more to what you've told me today.

S: I'm sorry, I just don't know. I'll tell you, Miss Echols, that never did interest me much.

E: Well, you've told me about that flood and nobody else has told me about the flood, and I'm glad to hear about that.

S: All of this stuff has never did interest me much, I never did take much interest in it.

E: Well, I'm glad to have met you and talked with you today.

[End of interview]

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