

David Johnson Lesslie

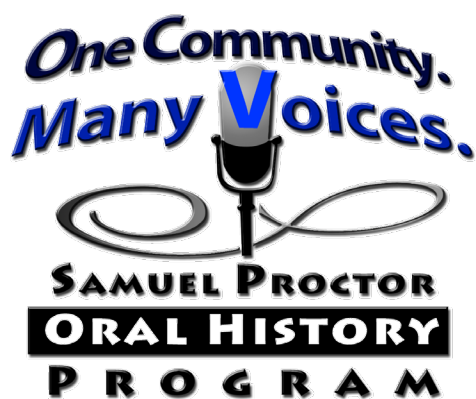
Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)

CAT-078

Interview by:

Emma Reid Echols

August 28, 1973



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Abstract: David Johnson Lesslie reflects on his experiences in Rock Hill, South Carolina, on the Catawba reservation. He remembers various Catawba leaders and their families. He reflects on doctors who worked on the reservation and the medical treatments they provided. He shares details about the churches on the reservation, and he remembers some of the teachers. He discusses those who moved away for education, and he outlines the effects of the Flood of 1916 on the Catawba River. He considers how the Catawba people he knew as children have transitioned into adulthood. He remembers the old ferry that crossed the Catawba River.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; John Early Brown; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Family histories; Indian reservations]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
P R O G R A M
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CAT 078

Interviewee: David Johnson Lesslie

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: August 28, 1973

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. This is August 28. I'm working on the oral history of the Catawba Indians, and I'm visiting in the home of Mr. Johnson Lesslie. Mr. Lesslie, give me your full name and your address.

L: David Johnson Lesslie, Route 6, Box 563-C, Rock Hill.

E: Mr. Lesslie, you've been living in this community all your life, haven't you?

L: Born here.

E: And your father—you and your father lived just a half a mile, just within sight of this home.

L: That's correct.

E: And so, you went to school at the Lesslie school?

L: Lesslie school.

E: Now while you were in school there, over on the Indian reservation, they had their own little private school. Let's see if you remember anything of the old things of the Catawba Indians. Do you remember Ben Harris?

L: I remember Ben Harris.

E: Tell us what you remember about him. What did he look like?

L: Well, he was—oh, I suppose weighed 180 pounds, probably five-foot-eight in height, brown face, Indian look.

E: Did you know whether he could read or write? Did he ever tell you anything about that?

L: I do not know.

E: The Indians tell me that he was the first teacher in their school, that a White lady by the name of Miss Culp up on the hill helped him to learn to read from newspapers and some little books, and then that he opened the first school down there. Would you know anything about that? Did you ever hear of that?

L: No, I have not. But the Culp's lived within a short distance of the reservation, I know that. I knew the Culp family well.

E: Now, Ben Harris had two brothers. Robert Harris, did you know him?

L: I knew Robert Harris.

E: What do you remember about Robert?

L: Just as a young fellow would observe, that's all. Not much.

E: Now, they had one other brother, didn't they? There were three of those boys?

L: There was one, I don't know if it was a brother, but there was a Harris that they called Billy Bowleg Harris. Now, whether he was a brother or not, I don't know.

E: Now, you say that Ben looked like an Indian. Did Robert and the other boy?

L: Yes, they did.

E: Did they wear their hair long?

L: Semi-long.

E: Semi-long. I understand that those were the last full-blooded Indians on the reservation, and when they died, there's no other one that has full Indian blood in them. Let's see some of the other ones that you remember. You remember Early Brown?

L: Oh yes, I knew Early Brown from his childhood. And his father.

E: And you knew his father was—?

L: John Brown.

E: John Brown. Now what did they do?

L: John Brown farmed some, was a good hunter, a crack shot, and hauled lots of wood. Now, Early was nearer my age, and he worked at various jobs, mostly on the river as ferryman.

E: Did you ever go hunting or fishing with Early Brown?

L: No, but I was in the reservation quite a bit when my brother was agent for the Catawba Indians.

E: Do you know when your brother was agent?

L: I don't have the dates in mind, but I could find it.

E: Who was your brother, this agent?

L: J. Dixon Lesslie.

E: J. Dixon Lesslie. If we found the dates, it would be interesting to have the dates. Do you remember what your brother did as an agent?

L: Well, he looked after the school to some extent. The appropriation was sent to him, and it was distributed proportionally to each individual **or** each family. The state appropriation—South Carolina appropriated certain monies for the Indians, and then a certain amount of that went to the school, and the rest was divided up equally among each Indian.

E: Do you remember how they took care of the medical needs of the Indians?

L: They had doctors to take care of their medical needs, and the state paid part of the doctors' charges, so much a month, as I understand it.

E: Now, you traveled around sometimes with your brother on the reservation. Were you affected by the poverty of the Indians?

L: Well, yes, I was. They were very poor. A few were good farmers. They made a right nice living. They would raise crops, cotton for the money crop. But some didn't have the education or get-up-and-go, and they lived rather poorly.

E: Do you remember whether they had any fruit trees on the reservation that would help them to supplement their monies?

L: I wouldn't remember that.

E: Now, what about fishing? Did you go down the Catawba fishing—?

L: Oh, they fished. They were good fishermen.

E: Now, I believe Early Brown took you across the river one time. Tell me about that.

L: Well, I was down there with my brother, and they were digging a well at the schoolhouse. They always had water from the springs, and they drilled a well at the school, and Early and I went to the river. It was in the summer, and he took me on his back and swam the river and back with me on his back. I was small, probably twelve years old and very small for my age. He was one of the best swimmers of the Catawba Indians.

E: You well remember that, I'm sure.

L: Oh, yes, sure.

E: Now, what about the school building? Do you remember what it looked like?

L: It was poor, yes. It was—

E: It was unpainted, I believe.

L: It was unpainted, and I think at times, they had school in the church, and then they had a school building. I'm not certain about that, but I think the first school they had probably was in the church.

E: Do you remember the first church, which was a frame building, not this cement block yard, but the first frame building?

L: Oh, yes. It was down near the school. The first school and the first church were close together.

E: Then you mean they're down in the inner section, near where Major Beck lives?

L: Yes, right in the center of the reservation at that time.

E: And the church and the school were both the same kind of little buildings, were they not?

L: Yes. The church had a cupola, and I don't think the school had a cupola.

E: But the school had a bell?

L: The school had a bell.

E: Yes. I know the little Indian boy would love to ring that bell. Now, that first church was just the one room, wasn't it?

L: It's just one room. It might have had an anteroom in the back or something like that, but it was just a very modest building.

E: Now, that was just made of planks that the Indians had cut from the forest.

L: Frame building, that's all it was.

E: The little schoolhouse **identically** the same materials.

L: It was the same materials.

E: The Indians tell me that before this, they possibly had a brush arbor. Do you ever remember seeing a brush arbor down there?

L: I don't remember that. That was before my day.

E: And then after the church was torn down, then they built a cement-block building for their church, which was painted white. Did the Indians build that themselves? Do you remember?

L: I don't remember.

E: Then I know you remember when they built the little schoolhouse further on up the hill that was two rooms and later on was painted white.

L: I remember that school.

E: And then they added a third room to it which made the kitchen, and that was the school. You've gone a long way back to remember. Now, tell me about the roads down at the reservation when you were a little boy.

L: Weren't any roads, there were paths. No modern roads, not even an up-to-date dirt road.

E: And you and your brother would go down in a horse or buggy, or how?

L: Well, we'd go in a car, but you see, we could get to the church very well in dry weather, not wet weather.

E: Now, how would the Indians get their mail? Would the mailman get through there?

L: The mailman was out of Catawba. They never did get their mail from the post office at Lesslie. Ernest Patton carried the mail all the time I knew about the mail over there.

- E: I'm sure there were times when even the mail couldn't go through there.
- L: Oh, yes, plenty times.
- E: Now, do you remember any of the teachers that taught down there? Let's see, way back was Ben Harris, and Robert Harris helped some, and Miss Macie Stevenson taught down there, and the Lesslie's—anyhow, the two Mr. Lesslie's taught down there. What one of these teachers do you remember?
- L: Well, I remember Miss Macie Stevenson, and I remember Than Lesslie—Nathaniel, rather.
- E: Did Mr. Than Lesslie live in Lesslie and drive out there?
- L: He lived about a mile and a half east of Lesslie, nearer the nation. And the other Lesslie—I reckon it was Septimus, wasn't it?
- E: Yes, Mr. Sept, that's right.
- L: Yeah, he was just a little bit older than I, and I remember him teaching there. And then later years, of course, they have a record of all that. You know, Miss Caldwell taught there, and lots of others that I don't just recall right now, but I knew 'em.
- E: Mr. Johnson, what did you feel was the attitude of the White people in the community toward the Indians? Were they indifferent to the Indians, or did they have friendship among them?
- L: It's just like a community where there were friendly—some were friendly, and others weren't. It's just that was the situation. I always liked 'em myself.

E: Did you ever see any of their old implements down the reservation? Did they show you any of their curios, their arrowheads, or bird points, or their old cooking utensils, anything of that kind?

L: No, just ones I gathered myself for my own use, or own pleasure, rather.

E: I suppose you found a good many.

L: I suspect some of the Indian boys gave me some.

E: I'm sure they did. Now, did you know Theodore Harris?

L: I knew Theodore Harris but not too well.

E: Some of these Indians went off to study, and I've not been able to find the names. I think Theodore Harris went to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Edith Brown, who married Early Brown, went to Pennsylvania to study. Do you know any others that went to Pennsylvania to study?

L: No, I don't know any of the others, but there was a Wheelock—was a Cherokee, I think—that came to the Catawba Nation and married and stayed here, and he was a football player at Carlisle. I remember him very well. He was very well educated. He worked at the Southern Railway depot in Rock Hill for a long while, but he was originally a Cherokee.

E: Now, he married an Indian on the reservation?

L: Married an Indian on the reservation, but I don't know who she was.

E: Now, she's Doris Blue's mother. She's Doris Blue and Edna Brown's mother, and both of them are still living on the reservation. And Mrs. Wheelock became one of the teachers at that school down there. I'm now adding something to your story information. I'm interested in what you say about Archie Wheelock. At one time,

he traveled also with a group of Indians who were demonstrating Indian medicines. Did you ever know about that?

L: I didn't know about that.

E: But he was a striking-looking Indian. Did you ever know of any other Indians from other Tribes who visited here?

L: No, I do not.

E: Did you know any of the Owl family?

L: Yes, I knew one or two, but I don't remember their given names or their first names.

E: Now, you were living here—it's a long time ago, but you were living here during the flood on the Catawba River.

L: That was 1916.

E: 1916. Tell me how that affected the people on the reservation and all of us here.

L: Well, anything that was close to the riverbank disappeared. That's about what I can say, that I didn't go to the reservation after the flood. I know I didn't, but everything was swept away that was close to the river.

E: And I believe the Indians had to make—they used their boats to ferry passengers across the river until the railroad bridge was completed.

L: I understand some of them did.

E: Now, in 1918 was the flu epidemic, and all the community was affected by that. Did you ever hear any stories of how that flu epidemic affected the Indians?

L: I was in France at the time.

E: Oh, yes, that's right. You didn't know any Indians who were in service, did you?

L: No, I did not.

E: Uh, Richard Harris?

L: He was in the service later.

E: He was the only one, and by the way, he went to France.

L: Well, I didn't know that he'd gone to France. I knew Richard Harris.

E: Do you remember Chief Blue well? What do you remember about Chief—?

L: Oh, I remember Chief Blue. He was one of the progressive ones. He looked after their affairs, I think, rather well at the time he was Chief, and he was Chief a long time.

E: Was he liked by the White people as well as the Indians?

L: He was one of the best-liked—better liked Indians over there. He could mix well with Whites.

E: Did you ever see him put on his Indian dance and give his Indian war whoop?

L: Oh, a dozen times.

E: He was a real showman, wasn't he?

L: He was, he was a real showman. He would dress in his Indian costume and go to town, walk up and down Main Street. He was known all over—well, all over the country, far as that's concerned.

E: And yet, he was just half-Indian. I believe his mother was an Indian, his father was a White man. Do you remember when he went to Salt Lake City?

L: I don't know the date, but I knew he went.

E: And I believe this is the time that he didn't wear his Indian suit, but he dressed up in a dark navy suit, and he and his wife were photographed as they left Rock Hill

by train, which was quite an experience for them. Were there any other Chieftains that you remember in the Tribe? Do you remember his son, Nelson Blue?

L: Oh, I remember Nelson Blue, yes, very well. But I wasn't associated with Nelson like I was with his father because his father raised cotton, and my father's ginned his cotton, so that's the reason I knew certain ones of them better than others, at least.

E: Mr. Johnson, you knew the Indians back when you were boys, and you played ball with 'em, and you tramped the hills with 'em, and you saw them in those days, and you know some of them today. Do you think there've been great changes since the old days, sort of thing?

L: Oh, yes. They've improved quite a bit, sure.

E: What occupations do you know they're employed in now?

L: Textiles, mostly. I think there was one or two nurses. Some of the girls went to be nurses.

E: And some of them, I believe, are doing mechanical work, electrical work, things of that kind.

L: Oh, yes. It's mostly in the textile field though, where they do that work.

E: Have you ridden down in the reservation lately to see the new roads that are down there so far?

L: Oh, it's been five years since I was down there. I rode over the reservation about five years ago. I took some friends down there to show 'em the old reservation and then part of the new reservation.

E: Now I suppose—do you remember the Canty family?

L: Oh, yes. Henry and Frank and **Martha**.

E: Who was their mother? Nancy?

L: Nope.

E: Sarah?

L: I just don't remember their given name, but I knew their mother very well.

E: Now, you remember Alonzo Canty?

L: Yes.

E: Moroni George, do you remember him?

L: I remember Moroni George.

E: Moroni George was a leader, wasn't he? A minor Chief?

L: Yes, he was very smart. I think he had a fair education.

E: Do you remember Dennis George—or Dennis Harris, whichever it is—who was trying to cross the trestle down here across to Van Wyke, and a train came along, and he held on, and he fell into the river. Do you remember that episode?

L: I don't remember that.

E: I didn't know whether you knew Dennis or not.

L: No, I didn't.

E: I think Dennis Harris is that name. Mr. Lesslie, tell me what you remember about the doctors down on the reservation.

L: The doctors were either appointed by the agents ... Some arrangements were made for the doctors to attend the Indians. Dr. Hill from Catawba was an Indian doctor for a long time, and he did their work, I don't know how many years. Dr.

Blackman was an Indian doctor, too. He lived in Rock Hill. And that's the only two I remember.

E: What do you remember about Dr. Hill, the first one?

L: Oh, Dr. Hill was a friend of mine. He was not too anxious to work, but he did work when he was called upon. He was smart. He was one of the best fever doctors in his day, one of the best red men—best red doctors in this community. I've often heard people say that he kept up with every bit of the newest medicine.

E: At that time, he would carry his own little bag of powders and mix his own medicine, did he not?

L: He mixed his own medicine. He carried his black bag and carried a certain amount of drugs and made his own mixture. All the doctors did way back then, or at least most of them did.

E: In talking about the older men, we did not discuss John Idle Sanders. Tell me what you remember about John Idle Sanders.

L: I just knew him. Well, John Idle, did he have a son named Idle Sanders?

E: I believe so.

L: Well, I think he was a carpenter, wasn't he?

E: That's right. He helped to work on the building of **Neely's Creek Church**.

L: Yes, I remember that. He lived over here at Lesslie for a while, while he was working on the church and walked to the job most of the time, unless someone picked him up. That was about two miles. Yes, he worked at the church, I remember that.

E: Do you know of any other Indians who were carpenters?

L: No, I do not.

E: I think he was the only one that I know that was.

L: I think he was the only one that made a living in carpenter work. I don't think he farmed any. I think he just worked as a carpenter all the while.

E: He married a Brown, I believe. Married John Brown's daughter, I believe that was the connection. And you'd remember John Brown, who was the ferryman, I believe, down on the Catawba.

L: Oh, yes.

E: Did you remember the old Cureton ferry?

L: Oh, yes, I remember the old Cureton ferry.

E: It was further down the river towards Lancaster.

L: Yes, it was further down the river from the reservation. It was down the river from the reservation. Now, the Cureton ferry is directly below Catawba, isn't it? Right through Catawba, right by the present bow waters and right on down to the ferry. Yes, I remember that very well.

E: That was the only way of crossing the river at that time.

L: It was, it was.

E: Mr. Johnson, before I finish this tape, maybe there's some things that I've forgotten to ask you about the Indians. Is there anything you'd like to say about the Indians? What do you think of the characteristics of the Indians as a whole? Were they honest and trustworthy and dependable, or were they suspicious of White people, or just what did you think about the Indians as a whole?

L: Well, that would be hard to say. It's just like human beings. They were just like human beings. Some were just as honest as they could be, others were questionable, and the world today is just like that. They were just like people, that's all.

[End of interview]

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