

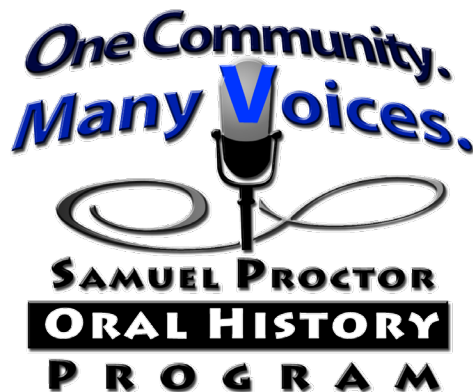
Lavada Ratteree

Cornish

Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-052

Interview by:

Emma Reid Echols
August 14, 1972



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CAT 052 Lavada Ratteree Cornish
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28 minutes | 17 pages

Abstract: Lavada Cornish recalls her experiences as a teacher at the Indian School from 1950 to 1966. She begins by describing her own experiences with education and the aspects of her background that led her to the teaching position at the Indian School. She then describes experiencing the transition her school went through as it was consolidated into a higher resource district, which mediated much of the school-related monetary issues of local families. Cornish taught first and second grade for the majority of her time at the Indian school, and she talks about how she maintained her classrooms and elements of art, music, religion, and physical education. Cornish provides detailed information about the school building and how her students helped to maintain its cleanliness and ends by describing how they cared for her sick and injured students.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Education; Communities]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY

P R O G R A M
University of Florida

CAT 052

Interviewee: Lavada Ratteree Cornish

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: August 14, 1972

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. August 14, 1972. I'm visiting in the home of Mrs. Lavada Cornish. Miss Cornish was formerly a teacher in the Indian school. Miss Cornish, will you give me your full name and your address?

C: I'm Miss Lavada R. Cornish. I live at Route 6, Box 442, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

E: Now who were you before you married?

C: I was—my name was Lavada **Ratteree** before I was married, and I have lived in this community all my life. In Rock Hill.

E: So, you have really been here in the community where the Indians have lived haven't you?

C: That's right.

E: And you got your education at Winthrop College?

C: That's right. In Rock Hill School District 3.

E: And so, you have come in contact with them for many, many years. Of course, when you went to school, Lesslie was your school?

C: No, I went to Raleigh. It's been consolidated into the Lesslie school. My early education, first through seventh, was at Raleigh School and then I went from there to Rock Hill High School where I completed my high school education.

E: And then to Winthrop College?

C: Then to Winthrop College.

E: And in all those years of your education, were you in any classes with any Indian children? Do you remember?

- C: Not that I remember. I probably was in high school, but I don't recall. I knew some of 'em, but they weren't in my classes.
- E: Now you have taught in the Indian school according to our records from 1950 to 1966. So really, you have the longest period of teaching of any one of the teachers and maybe you know more than anybody else. How did you ever happen to begin teaching in the Indian school?
- C: Well, I heard there was a vacancy then. At the time, I was not teaching and so I applied for it. And at that time, we were not in the Rock Hill district. We were in the Lesslie District and the Lesslie trustees hired me to teach for that year. And I just continued in there until we went and were consolidated into the Rock Hill schools.
- E: Do you remember if there was any difference in salary between your salary then and the salary that the other teachers were paid in the district?
- C: Yes, my salary was the same as a Lesslie at that time, but it improved as we went into the larger district because the districts were consolidated.
- E: Now you had another teacher helping you when you first went in, I believe. Mrs. Price was with you first, for 1950 and [19]51. Did you have the lower grades and she had the upper?
- C: Yes, I had first and second always when I was there. First and second and part of third when she was there. And always, all the years I taught that. I taught the first two grades.
- E: Then did you have a cafeteria at that time. When you first started you didn't, did you?

- C: No, we did not. We had—the children bought lunches. Some of them went home for lunch. And incidentally in the beginning, those early years when they went home for lunch, they sometimes didn't return. They didn't come back after lunch in those days, and I guess you couldn't blame them because they had to walk home and get their lunch and then had to walk back after lunch.
- E: Did you find it difficult with those little, tiny ones starting out to school for the first time. And those years, those Indians didn't have much money, was it very difficult for them to being pencils, and papers, and to buy their workbooks?
- C: Oh yes. It was hard in the beginning. And it was—one year I had, in the three grades, thirty-eight children and you know they—we had fair little materials to work with. But they seemed to get along and we made out what we had, the best that we had.
- E: And you had to improvise and make up things.
- C: Make up things and we used things that we can get our hands on and now they tell us that's the thing to do. But we did it through necessity. It wasn't because we had ideas you know.
- E: What did—did the children have to buy their own notebooks—workbooks? Or were they provided by the state?
- C: Well, no, they bought their workbooks at that time.
- E: And what about textbooks?
- C: For as long as I can remember. And their books were provided by the state, and we would go to York when we wanted new books and pick them up at the

county's superintendent's office. And when they finished those, we'd take back the ones they had and bring back more.

E: Now in first grade now, they'll have two or three groups but here you had three grades and so you had to have many groups.

C: Yes, and you—I guess it works on the same principle with having one grade with many groups, you know. You group those children when you have only one grade and with me, I had fewer children in the first grade and had second grade and it just was a rotating thing. And another thing, some of the older children would help, you know, maybe the second grade could help somebody in the first grade or sometimes the older children in the other classroom would come in and help with some of the smaller children.

E: Now that's exactly what they're doing in the schools today. Isn't that amazing—

C: I know—

E: That we've gone back to that. And that's good too. Did you have any difficulty in keeping one group quiet while you were teaching another group or were they listening in on your lesson?

C: I don't ever recall having any trouble keeping 'em quiet. I didn't think of it as being—they was always busy. I always found something that would keep the younger children busy. And if they were tired, they would go outside to play and they would come back in the room and the discipline was not a problem.

E: That's wonderful. And you didn't have any extra teachers to come in to help you with art, or music, or physical ed. and **that thing did you?** Did the whole thing.

C: No.

E: You did the whole thing, did you?

C: Yes, ma'am.

E: What about the artistic ability? Did you notice that?

C: Some. There were some children who were very artistic and some of 'em who weren't. I recall one of the Blue boys—**Lesslie** Blue was very artistic. I taught him and he really was but he didn't carry through with it and I don't think he ever went on through grammar school really. But he could really draw.

E: Do you know what's happened to Lesslie Blue?

C: I certainly don't. I really don't

E: Or do you know whose son he was? I'm not sure I could place him.

C: Oh, right this instance I can't.

E: We'll find out what happened to him a little bit later. I remember visiting that school many years ago and at that time, I had noticed in the Rock Hill school district and I found that some of your children could do things that children in the Rock Hill school district could not do. It was just really amazing. You were so far advanced they were. And what about music. Did they enjoy music?

C: They enjoyed music and they loved to sing and, of course, I had had no training and I do not play any musical instrument and I don't sing very well myself, but the children enjoyed it and we sang a lot and of course after Mrs. Robinson came, she would sing with the children, you know. She enjoyed that part—the musical part of it and teaching them to sing. And as time progressed, we were fortunate enough to get a record player and then we used the record player to help us with our singing.

E: And then when they went outdoors would they sometimes do singing games?

C: Uh-huh sometimes. And they loved to play ball. To play softball and running games. They were very athletic. Even the little ones, from the time they were very small, they would play softball and they enjoyed that very much.

E: And did the girls enter into that as well as the boys?

C: Yes, always. Never. It wasn't—it was never a segregated thing, you know, the boys and girls playing separate. And so, the girls could play as well as the boys.

E: I heard the girls tell about how they enjoyed those games. In the Rock Hill school district, lots of times they had rhythmic rhymes that they sang or chanted as they jump the rope. Do your children ever jump the rope and chant?

C: Oh yes. They did. They played those games.

E: They enjoyed that. Mr. Polk was so interested in your Indian children and Mr. Sullivan was too and they told me that as far as possible, they sent balls and jump ropes and things to your school whenever they could be obtained.

C: That's one thing that—once we were consolidated into the Rock Hill district, we never after that, as far as supplies, athletic equipment and paper and drawing paper and art materials, we had a sufficient supply after that.

E: Now do you know what year you were consolidated into Rock Hill?

C: I'm not sure.

E: I'm not sure either. I found this record, but we'll look it up and then we'll add it down at the end of this tape somewhere because I'm sure that would be interesting to know just when those supplies would be coming in to you. You moved to Lesslie in 1966, but you were part of Rock Hill long before then.

C: Before then, yes. It must've been around 1954 or [19]55, somewhere in that time, because I was only there a few years under the Lesslie district and then we were consolidated into the Rock Hill District Three. And that included Lesslie, you know, we all went into the **district**.

E: That's right. Now did you teach at the ol' Indian school before the new one was built up near the church?

C: No, I did not.

E: You always taught in the new?

C: I taught in the new building.

E: Well, that was quite an improvement on the older building.

C: I understand that it was.

E: Now, we were talking about the special things the children did. Did they, in their classes, did they bring back to you things from their church, bible stories, **or maybe** verses that they learned at church? Or did they enter into the devotional life that you'd have in the beginning?

C: Yes, and we always had devotion in the school at that time and they always were interested in it. And most of 'em went to primary and would go from school, you know, that was through the church they had what they called primary, which was like a Sunday school class after school about once a week and all the children went and they would come back and tell us the things that they did at that time.

E: Now they would go to the church to get that?

C: Yes

E: And who taught that class?

C: Well, different parents taught that class. You know, there was some classes at the church—

E: Just like Bible is being taught in our schools today. And I believe that is being continued today.

C: Yes, they still have it.

E: They still do that. So, they're very much interested in it, but I'm interested to know whether or not their religion, their Mormon religion, would clash with any of the things that you were teaching them from the Bible stories.

C: No, nothing that I ever came in contact with. I mean, I never clashed with them in any way.

E: And the younger children of course would accept this?

C: Yes.

E: Now we were talking about the special things **the** children did, what about really the basics of reading and writing and arithmetic. Did you find any part of that that they excelled in?

C: Most of 'em were very good in math. The reading was a little hard for them, which I think their living conditions would have something to do with but I think that their math, most of 'em were quick to catch onto things in math. And some of em had a really hard time with reading, some of 'em were very good in reading.

E: So, you said they were quick in math. Did you find that lots of times they reasoned or thought those answers out in their heads in math?

C: Yes, oh yes.

E: Many times?

C: Yes. They were, you might say, more observant, more logical, had more logic and some reasoning than, you know, most children of their age.

E: That's interesting. I guess that's because they had lived a life less—in the outdoors where they had to use their minds to think with and to reason with. Did they bring into you any stories of animals and birds and plants and things they've seen in the forest?

C: No, not especially that I can recall. Now maybe they did, but we were always taking nature walks I mean as far as—that was part of our science in the classroom, would be just to go out in the woods, best being out in the countryside, take walks in the woods in the fall and in the spring and we would find all these things and identify plants and leaves, yellow leaves, and berries and moss and wood and they enjoyed that. Rocks and things that children—most children find but they don't even know, they have no idea what's around them.

E: Did they ever bring you arrowheads or any of the pottery into school to share with you?

C: Not arrowheads, no, but they did bring pottery to me as gifts if they came from a home where they made pottery. I remember a little boy, **Handle** Johnson, years ago brought in a little piece of pottery that his mother had made. It had a flaw in it, but he brought it to me, and we kept it in the classrooms and at different times the others would bring in pieces of pottery, you know, and maybe it would have a flaw in it, but it was still their pottery and we kept it in the room.

E: They so often made animal pottery. Sometimes they would make snakes, toads or frogs, or even birds or a little dog. Did they ever give you any pottery like that?

C: Not that I remember.

E: They're going back to making some of that now, so I was wondering if they made that—

C: No, and I don't recall any of them making animals then. We tried, you know, in the beginning when Mrs. Robinson came. They worked at making pottery at school, some of the children did once. And they made some pieces at school. We got the clay and they made it there. But that didn't work too well because some of 'em didn't want to. They didn't seem too interested to work with the clay.

E: You were fortunate then in having the cook. You had Arzada Sanders cooking for you who was an excellent pottery-maker, wasn't she?

C: That's right and she would show them. And they were interested in watching her but the majority of 'em weren't interested in doing it themselves.

E: I guess they saw no future in it. Didn't want to do it. Now, you and Mrs. Robinson did so many extra things for your children. You had numbers of visitors come to your school. Tell me some of the visitors that came, if you remember. Some came from Columbia, I think.

C: Oh, yes. We had for a long time the boys and girls who attended Columbia Bible College would come and visit in the reservation and they would come and tell Bible stories to the children. But then some of the parents objected. Of course, they were non-denominational, but they didn't feel like they wanted outside people teaching their children and so that was discontinued but the children seemed to enjoy it and they really, in the years that they came there, did an excellent job with that. Then we had the girls from Winthrop who would invite the

children for parties, and they came out. And Mrs. Echols with her children came out numbers of times with her orthopedic school. And the children had the get-togethers and they enjoyed it immensely.

E: I remember when I brought all my crippled children out, that your children absolutely accepted them just like they were. There was no looking at them out of curiosity or pity, they just accepted them.

C: Oh no, I don't think they did. I recall having a little girl in my room who had had polio. A number of those children had physical defects, and they never paid any attention to that. I mean it just wasn't something that they made—it was something they accepted, and they treated the person as if they were a normal person. And I think it was a very good attitude.

E: Were you teaching then the year when you put on a big Thanksgiving program and the children all dressed up in the Indian costumes and you had a big Thanksgiving dinner?

C: Yes, I was.

E: Tell me about that.

C: Well, it's been so long now I don't even remember. But I do remember we got the materials and made the pants, and they were even in the Christmas parade that year, on a float. And Mrs. Fred Lawrence helped us to get the materials, someone helped us in getting the materials, and we worked, the teachers worked, the parents worked. And it's been such a long time ago, I can't recall the names of the people who did help us to put on that Thanksgiving thing.

- E: Well, those children remember it. Some of them still tell me they remember that float, that parade, and they remember the Thanksgiving dinner that they celebrated along with you.
- C: And you know Mr. Bob Ryan took pictures of that, and for a long time we had the pictures that we kept in the classroom down there of the children and when they closed the school, I think they were given to certain children who were on the float, you know, rather than send them on to Lesslie because nobody would be interested in having them there. And I don't recall to whom they were given.
- E: Well, they would be very interesting to see today. Do you remember any of your children, any of the Indians, that you know today that have gone on into high school or into business or into work of any kind around Rock Hill or anywhere else. I just wonder what had happened to these Indians.
- C: Well, I remember one particular child, Kenneth Harris. He's the son of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Harris, and he's gone on to graduate from Brigham Young University, and I don't know what exactly he's doing at this particular time, but I can remember when he started in the first grade. You just couldn't satisfy his curiosity. He was curious about everything. And he was interested in doing all kinds of work. And over and beyond is what he was supposed to do, so he went on and did real well.
- E: And that's Alfred Harris' son? Now, they have a daughter I believe who is a nurse at York General Hospital.
- C: Yes, Vicky.
- E: Vicky. I haven't got them on tape yet but that's a remarkable family, isn't it?

C: It is.

E: Now do you know any others, any that are living in Rock Hill now that are in business or working for themselves?

C: No, I don't have a child—Phyllis Beck finished. She's Mrs. Don Williams now, she went to—I don't know if she finished college or not. I'm not sure. But she was a secretary. And then there was Connie Wade. He went on to finish Clemson. And it's hard to recall special, you know, the children and—

E: It would be interesting to have a list of children who have gone on wouldn't it?

C: It would.

E: Maybe we'll get that list a little bit later. Ms. Cornish, when you first went to the school, I believe it had two classrooms, an auditorium, and a kitchen, and of course the bathrooms. Which is quite an improvement over the old Indian school. How did you heat your classroom at that time?

C: When I first went there, the classrooms were heated by gas heaters, small space heaters, and there were two in each classroom. And in the auditorium was a fireplace and a coal heater. One of these old-fashioned, round coal heaters and if we wanted to have a program or anything in the auditorium, we had to make the fire early in the morning to heat up the auditorium because it was quite large and when we wanted to use the auditorium on the winter days for physical education, we had to heat it if the weather was really cold. Later, after we were in the Rock Hill District, they removed the gas heaters because they were not properly vented, and it was not healthful condition for the children they thought at that time to have gas heaters in the classroom. And they put in oil heaters—space heaters

in the back of each classroom and that was the heat that we had. The desks in the classroom were little individual desks and they were very pretty, and the children took especially good care. And since I've taught in other schools and have noticed the way children really mark the desk and a lot for the desks are not taken care of, I realized how well they took care of those desks. And we always cleaned our desk once or twice a year—each child cleans his own desk and then we polished it with furniture, and they would always shine, and they never marred 'em up or wrote on them. I don't think there was one of 'em that had been scratched or marred when they were moved out of that school.

E: That's remarkable. And you had no one help you clean the building at the end of that day. You all swept your building and, you and the children together, swept your building and cleaned it up?

C: That's right. Until Mrs. Sanders started cleaning the building along after she would finish her—when she became our cook and opened the lunchroom, then she took on the duty of sweeping the classroom, but for years the children would sweep the rooms and clean them themselves, and I might say some of the older boys would come in and clean the room for me and it was a joy for 'em to do it. They didn't look on it as being something they were being made to do, it was a privilege for to get to sweep the place.

E: And they also helped you make the fire I suppose?

C: Oh yes. Always. They were very helpful, very considerate I thought.

E: Now Mrs. Cornish, you've taught so many different children. You've taught some special education classes I believe? Am I right?

C: Yes.

E: And you taught first, second, and third at Indian school? And now you're teaching third grade at Ebenezer school in Rock Hill. Will you tell me as you go back in your memory, how do the Indian children compare to the other children you've taught?

C: Well, really I just think they was the same as any other children. There were good children. There were children that were more capable and some who were less capable but when you look at them as a whole, they were all children, and they were all a joy. They are a joy to teach.

E: You had no one to help you with the discipline or anything else. If a child was hurt or if a child was in a fight, who settled it?

C: Well, that became my responsibility for 'em. If somebody was hurt, if somebody got sick, you'd have to take them home or if somebody was hurt and I thought they needed to have a doctor, we'd take them to the doctor or take them to their parents. I recall once a child fell, slipped on the ice, and fell and cut her lip, and I had to take the child and her mother to the doctor because she had no other way to get there. And as far as little scratches and cuts and bruises and things, we had our little band-aids and alcohol and things at school. First-aid kit. We took care of all those little things by ourselves. And then when we went into the Rock Hill District, Mrs. **Looten** would come out, you know, occasionally and check the children to make sure we had no communicable disease or anything that might require a special attention.

E: What about the parents. You visit some of the homes. Did you find them cooperative and friendly towards you?

C: Oh, yes. Always. I had a good rapport with all the parents. And maybe when I first started teaching there, I had, well, quite a discussion with some of them, but we soon straightened out all the problems. Afterwards, I never had any trouble with any of them. They were always open and willing to discuss what was wrong with the children.

E: Well, I know they remember you with a lot of gratitude.

[End of interview]

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