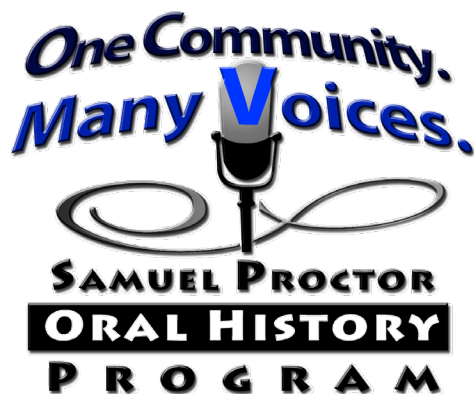


Lavinia Alberta Canty Ferrell

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-058**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
September 16, 1972**



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Abstract: Alberta Ferrell talks about her life and her experience as a pottery maker. She learned how to make pottery by watching her mother and with the guidance of her aunt, Isabelle George. Ferrell created her own unique style as she grew up by incorporating new designs that included animals and people into her pottery. Ferrell describes the importance of signing her pottery and creating duplicate pieces for her children to keep as heirlooms. She then describes how she gets her pottery to be so colorful and shows off her various pieces, including the ones made by her children.

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

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

CAT 058

Interviewee: Lavinia Alberta Canty Ferrell

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: September 16, 1972

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. This is September 16, 1972. I am visiting in the home of Mrs. Jack Ferrell. She was, I believe, Alberta Canty, but I'll let you tell you about herself. Mrs. Ferrell, tell me your full name before you were married.

F: Lavinia Alberta Canty.

E: And you're now Mrs. who?

F: Jack Ferrell.

E: Tell me about, who were your father and your mother?

F: My father is Alonzo George Canty, and my mother is Fanny Harris.

E: Your mother, I believe, is dead?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: But your father is married again?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: And your father lives on Route 3 near the reservation, doesn't he? To tell you a little bit about her, she lives in a lovely home here in the suburbs of Rock Hill. She and her husband are paying for this home, and it's one of the nicest homes I've ever been in. She's especially noted for her pottery-making. And I remember, many years ago, her pottery, and I also remember that she was an Indian in the pageant at Winthrop. Her pictures appeared in the newspapers in the write-ups at that time when she crossed the stage with her whole little family. They were singing an Indian song, which maybe she will have time to sing for us today. Let's

go back to years ago, Mrs. Ferrell. Tell me what you remember about the early days when you were a little girl coming up on the reservation.

F: Oh, I just remember helping my mother with pottery, but she never let us make it. They used to have to go across the river in boats and dig clay and bring it back, then carry it a good ways, you know, to the house. But she wouldn't let us fool with the clay and waste it, as she would say. But we used to help her gather up the wood, you know, to burn it, and we used to help her to rub it. She did all the making; her and Daddy, you know, did the scraping, but the children did most of the rubbing.

E: What did you rub it with?

F: A rock.

E: And each child had their own little stone they'd use?

F: Each one had their own stone that they'd use.

E: Then you'd sit around in the evenings and perhaps prepare that pottery for sale, then, did you?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Did you help prepare the soil or the clay for making the pottery? Did your mother let you help stir it up and mix it?

F: Yes, ma'am. We stir it and mix it ourselves. I remember Daddy dug her a big ol' hole out behind the house because when you heat the pots, if you let the air hit 'em, a lot of times you'll crack 'em or break 'em while they're hot. When you burn them, you have to let 'em cool off, gradual-like, not let anything break.

E: Then after your mother had prepared the pots and they were ready for sale, where did you go to sell them?

F: Well, a lot of times we'd sell them around here, but most of the time Daddy used to take 'em up to the new shops in the mountains. Sometimes I'd remember helping Rachel Brown—she's passed on now, you know. I used to help her carry her boxes and her bags, and we'd sit up at the college with different college girls to look at the pottery. We'd set 'em out. I'd just be there to do the stooping around and help her with her pottery, help her carry.

E: You didn't get much money for them in those days, did you?

F: No, ma'am.

E: What kind of prices did you get for them?

F: I think I remember something like a nickel and a dime, fifteen cents, a quarter. I think if we'd get a quarter for a pot back then, we really thought we had something.

E: And it would take you a long time to make that pottery. How long would it really take you to make one batch of pottery, let's say?

F: Oh, I'd say it'd take a good month to make a good batch of pottery or more.

E: One whole month? To make a kiln full that you would fire?

F: Yeah. Sometimes you'd get it dug, and two different kinds end up getting mixed together. One kind, we get our clay in the woods.

E: Oh, you do?

F: The blue clay.

E: Do you still find that blue clay around here now?

F: Same old clay. Same thing was in the woods when the old Indians used to go a long time ago. There's not no big cave. You'd be surprised how small it is compared to all the clay that's been dug out of it over the years.

E: I've never seen that cave or know where it is. Whereabouts is it?

F: It's over in Brandywine. Close to—not too far from the clay hole where we get clay on the river bottom, but it's on a private place.

E: Who owns this land there where you get the blue?

F: I don't really know who owns the land where the cave is now.

E: It sounds so interesting what you tell about pottery. Let's go on about the pottery, and then we'll come back to some of this other a little bit later. You lived in your mother's home, and what about your sisters and brothers? Did they help with the pottery?

F: We all did.

E: The boys, too?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Did each one of you work out some original design, or did you all make the same sort of pottery, little vases and so forth?

F: Well, none of us made it then. Just Momma made it.

E: All you did was just scrape it?

F: Some of the other Indian women would come, you know, they'd come visit. They'd all sit there and make 'em. But the fact is the children weren't allowed to fool with the clay because they thought we'd wasted it.

E: When did you first start making pottery of your very own?

F: After I was married.

E: Oh, really? You'd been through school and married and started having a family, and then you started making your pottery?

F: Yeah. Sitting around with my Aunt Isabelle, we started doing it. And she was going to make some pottery, so I let her show me how. I'd watched Momma make pots before, but I really didn't know how.

E: Is Isabelle George living?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: And who is she now?

F: She lives out behind Tech.

E: She's Mrs. what? What is her—

F: Mrs. Isabelle George.

E: Mrs. Isabelle George. Does she live alone?

F: My uncle lives out there with her, and I think another family's living with her right now.

E: Now, what's your uncle's name?

F: Dennis Harris.

E: Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Harris?

F: No, she's Isabelle George.

E: No, she's Isabelle George?

F: And he's Dennis Harris.

E: And he's Dennis Harris.

F: Uh-huh.

- E: Does she still make pottery, the one who started you on it?
- F: No, she can't make it anymore. She hurt her hand. She got it caught in the washing machine and hurt her arm, and she can't make pottery anymore.
- E: And she's the very one that started you doing it. That's a pity she can't make it any longer. Then, go ahead and tell me about when you were married and began sitting around and making pottery. Did you work up your own designs for making pottery?
- F: Yes, ma'am. Well, I think about the pots that Momma used to make, and I'd just have them in my mind, and I'd sit there and make 'em. I tried to teach my children how to make 'em also, and they can't do the same things that I can because they didn't have the **motor**. I guess it's more a hereditary thing, and you can get it or you can't.
- E: That's right. Well now, I've seen lots of pottery down on the reservation, but yours has always been different. Your work is always distinctive because it's a certain little animals and certain little things that you make that are different from anybody else. Nobody else's is quite like yours. Do you feel like that yours is different as you are making it?
- F: Yes, ma'am. Because I take more pain and more time with each piece that I make. Every step that I go through, I take so much more time, I think.
- E: Well, how'd you feel—
- F: Don't rush through it in no hurry, you know, tryin' to hurry up and get some done and out of the way. I try and make mine just as pretty as I can.

E: That's wonderful. And how did you feel when you had one finished? Did you feel real happy and contented when you got a real pretty piece done?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Well, now, when you got a real pretty piece done, you almost want to keep it for yourself, you almost didn't want to sell it, did you?

F: No, ma'am, and the children don't want to either. They like more, they got a piece of mine now. It broke because I hadn't squeezed out the air pocket in it, so this air pocket popped in the heat. So, it's a boat with an Indian head on the end.

E: And the colors in that are so very lovely. You showed that to me a moment ago.

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: It's a very beautiful piece, and then lots of these small pieces. Now, these two ducks here for bookends, did you make these?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: They are heavy.

F: And the front of the air conditioner fell off, you see, and broke the neck off of it. And Jack glued it back together, but these is hard to keep because they're solid.

E: They're very, very heavy.

F: It's hard to get all the air pockets squeezed out of a heavy, solid piece like it is.

E: Then it'd be very easy to break it even when you're firing it, wouldn't it?

F: Mhm. I made about a dozen of these at one time, and this is the only one that kept. They all popped all to pieces. I didn't have all the air pockets squeezed out.

E: On the bottom of this it reads, "By Alberta Ferrell. 1968. Catawba Indian pottery." And this is lovely. Some of this pottery I have seen is heavy and clumsy, but Mrs.

Ferrell's is different; it's graceful, and it's very beautiful. Of course, we do not know the colors until they're fired. Now, how do these colors happen to be so pretty in here? Is that purely accident that they turned out so pretty?

F: You never know what color they're going to come out. Some of 'em come out dull-looking; some of 'em come out real pretty and shiny. Some of 'em have solid, shiny, black; some of 'em have white on them, some of them have red. You just don't know. Some of 'em have all the colors on it. This is when it tickles me, whenever I have a piece that come out with all the colors on it!

E: You were telling me about this pot over here on this coffee table.

F: The bookends? The swan bookends?

E: That's right.

F: Well, even though they're broke, they've been glued back together. They're not for sale, 'cause I can't get it—I haven't had another pair to keep.

E: That's very interesting. And you made a dozen to get one pair?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Now, when you first were married, where did you live?

F: In Rhode Island.

E: Oh, yes.

F: My husband was stationed in the navy.

E: And then when you came, you didn't make pottery until you began coming south to live here?

F: No, I didn't make any 'til, I believe, after my first child was born.

E: Where were you living then?

- F: We had a little house out on the new reservation.
- E: Then you continued making pottery out there and sent your children to Northside School, right?
- F: Yes, ma'am.
- E: How many children of yours went to Northside school?
- F: All four of 'em.
- E: And I taught your little daughter, Marsha, in the third grade at Northside school. And now it's been a long time, but I remember that she brought me little pieces that she had made. And at that time, she could write in the Catawba language. She wrote her name in the Catawba language, but she could not speak it. You may not remember that, but I remembered quite well that she did that for me. I wish I had saved the little writing she did for me at that time. So you continued to make pottery, and it's individualized and different pottery. And where did you find a market to sell your pottery?
- F: Well, just different people around here in Rock Hill, you know, at first wanted our pottery. And then some of the gift shops.
- E: A big Glasscock store had some there for a while, and Bea's Book Shop in Rock Hill had some.
- F: Yes, ma'am, and so did Sturge's Feed and Supply Store; they sold some.
- E: And many people would come through?
- F: And Good's Gift Shop had some. If they still have a shop, I'm not sure, but they did have some. I just make some every once in a while. I don't make it all the time.

E: Do you always sign your name to yours?

F: Most of the time 'cause a lot of times I just give some of mine away as gifts. And that way, people will know who they get it from.

E: I think that's very, very important.

F: I tried to make pieces for all my children. A piece of every kind that I know how to make—miniature pieces—so they'll have them after I'm gone.

E: Tell me what different kinds you make, starting with maybe your little vases, different sizes, little pitchers.

F: Vases and pitchers and wedding jugs, gypsy pots. Turtles, swans, a canoe, peace pipes, the arrowhead pipes. What else 'round here?

E: In making the peace pipes, you so often put little decorations on them. Do you make up those decorations in your head? Do you have any design to go by?

F: No, most of them I just make up in my head, but I do have some designs, too.

E: That you look at to remember?

F: Mmhm.

E: But you still don't copy anything; it's all done in your mind. What tool do you use to put the designs on with?

F: Usually, nails. I do what I call a dry web, or I carve with a knife.

E: Recently, you raised your family, and some of them are married and gone, and you still have one daughter here at home, I believe, but I notice you're still doing pottery. Tell me how you're doing your pottery today in this modern home here on a busy street in Rock Hill.

F: I have my little house out back that my husband built—my husband and I built—to keep the dryer in and different little things. And he's got a little old tool bench out there, and I just started making a few pots in there. That way, I wouldn't have my house in such a mess because it does make a big mess. You have scrapings and all the little shavings off of it.

E: Do you have clay out there in your little house now?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Then, whenever you have some spare time, or when you want to just relax—this is your hobby—you go out and make some pottery?

F: Yes, ma'am, whenever I have any made up. I hadn't made any in about three years until this past year, when I made a few. But I just make it every so many years so I won't forget how to make it. That's mainly what I'm trying to do.

E: Then, when you get a group made, then you fire it. Now, tell me how you fire your pieces.

F: Put it in my oven that I got in the kitchen and start it off on low. And each hour, I turn it up maybe another hundred 'til I get it up to the highest degree that it'll go, which is about five-fifty. And I usually bake my pieces about six to eight hours; it all depends on the size pieces I've got. If they're real small, then it don't take as long; if they're bigger, then it takes longer. You heat 'em long, so they'll be baked, you know, heated good through and through. Then I take them out and put 'em in a tub and try to cover that tub so that the air won't get 'em while they're hot and break 'em. Take 'em out and put 'em in a trash drum—where my son dug a hole in the ground—and I lay the trash drum down in that hole to keep from so much

air hitting 'em while they're hot also. Then I put 'em in these drums and build a fire over 'em.

E: What kind of wood do you use for your fire?

F: Different kinds, any kind that I can get my hand on, 'cause different kinds brings out different colors. You just set and watch as different colors come on that pot. If I have a piece that comes out real light, and I don't like them—it's light all over—well, I can lay a piece of wood across that pot, let it burn some more, and it would burn a different color right across where I laid that wood or a piece of bark. Or I have started them up with sawdust shavings and stuff like that, different things—little piece of bark'll bring out different colors. If it's black, you can't change that. It's just gonna stay that color. But if it's a light color, you can change it with a piece of bark or the shavings of sawdust or something and just pretty it all up if it's light, you know, make it a little different.

E: And you look down into that drum and see what colors there are, is that right?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: And then you want to change it, you just change it by the wood?

F: If it's light, I can change it. If it's dark—black, some form of black, I can't change it.

E: That's right. You are the only person that's told me that they try to change the colors. All the other pottery makers just accept whatever comes out of that kiln. they don't uncover—

F: I did at first, but I tried experimenting with different little things.

E: That is very interesting. Now, tell me about your children. You tried to get them to make some. Do any of them try to make some pottery?

F: Well, Mona, she made a few little plain pieces. Kevin, the boy, he can make it if he will, but he thinks it's women's work. He don't think boys is supposed to make it. He don't wanna fool with it because he's a boy—other than diggin' it for me and helping me work it up, you know, get my clay ready. That's all he cares to do. Or he helps me burn it, get my wood, or help me carry it out, 'cause it's heavy when you get a whole lot of it burned and put it in the tub and carry it out, and he usually helps me do that. Taught my husband how to burn the fire. He's not Indian, but—at first, when he saw the first Indians trying to do this, he laughed at me like he thought it was something crazy I was trying to do. He didn't think it would come out like it does. So, he's seen me do it hisself.

E: He's fascinated.

F: He was fascinated. That's right.

E: When you take it out of your kitchen oven, it's still hot, isn't it?

F: Yes.

E: Very hot, even after you've baked it. You do not leave it in until the oven ever cools? The oven, the pottery is still hot when you take it out?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: And so you must be real careful in lifting it out and putting it into that tub?

F: Yes, ma'am.

E: Now, some of the pottery makers that I have talked to say that they leave it in the oven 'til it's cool, and then they fire it again outdoors. But you don't wait until yours is cool, do you?

F: No, ma'am.

E: I believe that's the reason you get such beautiful pieces.

F: Almost burn up myself when I'm burning pots. It gets so hot, you know, with the oven and then out around a fire 'til— It's made me downright sick, 'cause we used to do it when it was hot weather. In fact, every time you do it, you can't— unless you have an inside place to burn it, you can't burn it in the wintertime. You can't make the pots unless you got a good place to keep it in the wintertime, or it would freeze.

E: Now, do you lose some of your pots when you transfer them or when they're fired? If you made twelve pots, how many of those would be broken when you get the final results?

F: I've had good luck with my pots. I haven't had very many that broke at all. Like the piece that Mona showed you, the boat that the air pocket popped out of, well, that boat is pretty as can be. There've been people that wanted to buy it, but she didn't want to sell it because of all the pretty colors in it. She said, "Momma, I've never seen one with all the pretty colors in it like these, and I'm not going to let anybody have this one. I'm going to keep it myself." She'll show it to people, but then she'll take it back.

E: Now I hold in my hand some of the beautiful pottery that Alberta has made and her family. And first of all, let's take a look at the—I wish you could see it—this beautiful canoe. Tell me about it, Alberta. It's about two feet long.

F: Well, it's what I call Indian head canoe because I've got the Indian head on each end.

E: Then you have a swirly design in the bottom of the canoe. And the colors in it are beautiful—they're gold and yellow and black. The colors are really lovely. And the features on the faces! Now, did you shape that with your hand, your fingers?

F: I've got a piece of a mold, but it's not good, 'cause, you see, the heads on that is not that good. I have to redo the whole thing. This gives me a outline of a head.

E: This is the one that was cracked a little bit, but it's so beautiful you would not sell it for any price, would you?

F: No, ma'am.

E: It's the only one of its kind that you have. I hope you'll make another sometime to hand down to your children. That is beautiful. Now, you married a White man, and he became interested in the pottery making, too. Tell me about the cups that your husband made.

F: Well, he was just fascinated at seeing me trying to make the pottery, and he used to laugh at me. But then he saw how it come out, then he was fascinated. So one day, he sat down and tried to make a piece himself, and he made a cup. Didn't come out too fine, but I straightened it up and made some carvings on it, and put his initial on the side, and I carved in the bottom when he made it.

- E: And the date on the bottom, says, "By Jack Ferrell. 4/20/68. Catawba pottery."
The colors in this are lovely, and it is truly a man's cup. It's heavy and masculine-looking and thicker than some of the ones that Alberta made. Let's see if Alberta put her name on the big Indian pot; she did: "Handmade Indian pot, by Alberta Ferrell." But there's no date on this one. This is the one, the beautiful canoe that she made. And then I'll pick up another one here. Here's a beautiful little pitcher. This is about three inches tall with a little handle to it. Tell me about this one. This is by Lorna.
- F: Well, there's not too much, I don't guess, I can tell you on this except that she did all the finishing touches on that.
- E: The little decoration is a flower.
- F: She did that, too.
- E: And up the handle, there's another little swirly design of flowers. She did that herself?
- F: Yes, ma'am.
- E: Now, this is your daughter that is in high school, and she is the one that certainly seems to be able to make pottery. Let's pick up another one here. Here's another little one. Evelyn made it for her mother, date "7/69." And again, this is a little tiny pot. This one also has a different design entirely. Now, what would Lorna put the designs on there with? A nail?
- F: A nail. And then go over it with a pencil to kind of smooth it out.
- E: This one is about two inches tall. Here's one that is made by Marsha. "Made 7/69. Made for Mother." Tell me what you call this shape.

F: Just a plain little old bowl, about like a little finger bowl.

E: Although Marsha and Loma are sisters, the designs are not at all alike. They're entirely different, and this is a very pretty little bowl. Then here's some smaller little pieces by Lorna—a little tiny ashtray, little miniature ashtrays. "By Marsha, To Mother" again. Then, we have a boy here who has a beautiful piece. I'm saving it for the last because it's the prettiest one of all. Now, I hold in my hand the most unusual one of all. This one is a little pitcher with a beautiful handle. The colors are orange and brown or black. A swirly "F" is on it on either side, and a little design worked with a nail. This on the bottom says, "Handmade Indian pottery, 6/70," and it's made by her son. What's his name? I can't quite read it.

F: Kevin.

E: Now, will you tell me about Kevin? What was his interest in pottery?

F: Well, Kevin can make just about anything that I can, if he will. But he thinks it's a woman's work, and he don't like to fool with it because he's a boy—except digging the clay and help me make it up. And he's also learned how to scrape it, to rub it, bake it, burn it, everything.

E: You've handed me, Alberta, a little container filled with all the things you use. Let me just describe. There are three little knives in here and spoons, a little broken spoon that she will use, a little nail, several nails she might use to mark with, and rubbing stones of various sizes and various kinds. And would you use various sizes with different pottery?

F: Yes, ma'am. Now, take this rock, it's big enough for a hole to use on a bigger pot. You just go to town, you know, on a big piece of pottery.

E: And here's a beautiful one, looks almost like a jellybean.

F: Okay, you'd use a smaller rock to get in smaller parts, places where you couldn't do it with a big rock.

E: And here's a curved one. Look how it fits in the hollow of your hand. What would you use that one for?

F: Different little places you can get into, where you couldn't with a big rock.

E: Mrs. Ferrell, you told us so many interesting things, and I'm going to have to come back, and you tell me some more things another day. Thank you so much for visiting with me.

[End of interview]

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