

# Reverend Billy Osborne

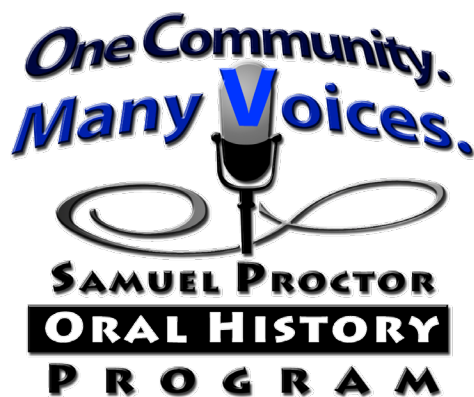
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**

**CAT-145**

**Interview by:**

**Emma Reid Echols**

**February 9, 1981**



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**20 minutes | 10 pages**

**Abstract:** Reverend Billy Osborne discusses the history of the Catawba Indians as a nation. He traces the effects of settlements in the early nineteenth century on the organized nation. He speaks about his research with the University of South Carolina and how the Catawba people accepted him into their community. He discusses his book on the Catawba Indians, which was not yet published at the time of the interview. He shares his thoughts on cultural assimilation into White society as well as renewed interest in Catawba culture.

**Keywords:** [Catawba Nation; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Tribal history; History]

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
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CAT 145

Interviewee: Reverend Billy Osborne

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: February 9, 1981

E: **I'm in** Rock Hill, South Carolina, February 9, 1981. I'm visiting in the home of Mr. Billy Osborne.

[Break in recording]

O: Route 2, Greenwood, South Carolina.

E: Route 2, Greenwood, South Carolina. We may have to stop because of the saws, but that's all right. Mr. Osborne, you [inaudible 00:25] Indian Land and Fort Mill when I last interviewed you, and you told me so many interesting things, and I'm ready to come back. Just a moment ago, you were telling me how once, years ago, the Indians were a proud race. I want to get that on tape, what you thought of the Indians then.

O: Well, at one time, the Catawba Indians was considered as a Nation. They were a agricultural people who lived off of the land. At the same time, they were very proud of who they were, due to the fact that we see in the early 1800s, we see them still considering themselves to be a Nation, instead of just a Tribe. That carried on over through the eighteenth century. Around 1825, we begin to see a change, and that's when we begin to see settlers settling in and around the Catawba Indians. We find that they were more orderly fashioned due to the fact that we can pinpoint where they made settlements within the area by the artifacts that we found within those areas. Even at the beginning of the land grant, although some were unable to write their names, you find that they were a very organized group with the Chief. They would have tribal meetings to make decisions. We see this in the land grants—that decisions were not just left up to

individuals; they still had to have their tribal meetings to make those decisions, which we still have to carry on over to today. But, from all indications through my research, the Catawba Indians were organized; they were a proud race; they considered themselves not to be just Tribes but actually a Nation in the early 1800s. It's only been through the last few years that a lot of that pride has been lost. Well, I say the last few years, but in the last two hundred years, that pride has eventually been lost of being a Catawba Indian.

E: You did a great deal of research and a great deal of work with the University of South Carolina. When I was in your home, your bulletin board was filled with articles and things you'd written. What happened to all your artifacts and your articles you'd written?

O: The South Carolina Archives has a lot of articles and artifacts. They also have the land grant book on microfilm. The rest of that, I have packed away in a trunk that is at my home that I still own and am renting out at the present time. But some of the things I gave to the Indian Land school for them to see how they came about being called Indian Land. Then I also gave Dr.—was it Dr. Brewer? Wrote *The Discovery of South Carolina*.

E: I believe so.

O: All right, Dr. Brewer has written an article concerning some of the artifacts that we found. And then the rest of it, I packed away for my own children, for them to have some concept of where they come from, and the area from which they come, and the history of that area. So, a lot I have still got and will continue including; I still got the first notes that I did on the research.

E: You came in contact with a large number of Indians. What was the relationship between you, a White man, and the Indian as you were doing this?

O: The relationship was very good because I had a compassion and an understanding for those Indians. I felt a close tie with them in many respects, and it was easy for me to get into their homes. Many of them gave me potteries that they made during that time. I was more accepted into them more so because I think I was one of the first ones that really began to show an interest in who they were and tried to help them to understand that they need to be proud once again. This book was about part of the Catawba Nation.

E: They have been abused and exploited so much. Tell me some of the Indians that you remember that you visited in the homes.

O: Well, let's see. Mrs. Sanders.

E: Arzada Sanders.

O: Right.

E: And her husband, Idle.

O: Right. She accepted me gracefully after she got to know me the first couple of times I visited there. They are a group of people—they have to come to know you to be that open and gracious to you. I find it unique, though, that of all the ones that I did visit—of the older ones, Sanders, Blue, uh ...

E: **Harris.**

O: ... Harris. Of all of them, I found that they were glad that somebody was interested enough in them to say, "Hey, we need to share this story with other people and preserve this history that you once had." And also, I found through

working with them that they were scared that even the ability to make pottery was going to soon be lost, the art of pottery making. I find this very evident in all my interviews with them, was that they were afraid that their childrens would not know how to make the pottery. And that was the last thing that they really had left to give to the children.

E: Since you left there, they had a school down on the reservation, and a whole group of young boys and girls came and went to the school to make pottery.

O: I believe that that was one of the turning points, was the fact that they got to the point there was not but a handful who could do it. And they come to the realization that they were gonna to have to pass this on to the next generation.

E: That certainly is true. They're proud of what they can do, and they want to share it with other people. What about your—the artifacts that you have mostly are in the University of South Carolina, at their library there?

O: And the university in the archeology department. The archeology department itself has most of the facts of the artifacts that were discovered, including that go back some two thousand years in the artifacts. The South Carolina Archives has most of the printing materials that I have given to them.

E: I'm very interested in your book, and I want to know when do you think you'll have it published now?

O: Lord only knows. [Laughter] Again, it would take a financial backing of a book publishing company or a group of people who was concerned enough to see this be published to bring it about because the book itself is a large, volume-type book.

E: Will it be as large as Mrs. Brown's book?

O: It will be as large as Mrs. Brown's, but it will contain more pictures. And also, it covers large area of time—a large period of time, from the time of the early Indians until—well, the early discovery of the Catawba Indians, until, oh, I say around 1960. So, it's covering a large period of time, but it's written in a readable form. I tried to deal with the facts and then still make those facts sound interesting enough by cutting down on words by using pictures.

E: That's good.

O: To say what really needs to be said.

E: You are a Methodist minister now, and I know you've attended funerals on the reservation. What do you find about their religion and their beliefs?

O: I have not attended a funeral on a Catawba Indian reservation. I know of my research some of their beliefs in their religion. They did believe that the spirit would take whatever object that was placed with them to the other world. And so sometimes, they would place their favorite arrow, or their favorite pottery, or whatever may be that individual's favorite thing within the grave of the Catawba Indians. That we found out to be when we'd discover certain sites that we felt that was the gravesites of some of the Catawba Indians. So that's the only information I have concerning their religious beliefs, was the fact that they believed that they could take their favorite thing—their spirit—and their spirit would have it.

E: They have recently built a new community house in the reservation, and the old school is painted over completely. It looks very nice on the outside.

- O: The last time I saw the school building, the windows were broken out, it was dilapidated. I would have not believed that you would have renovated and remodeled that particular building.
- E: I haven't been inside, but it was just beautiful on the outside—the schoolhouse and the church, as well.
- O: It was run down tremendously when I first started the research.
- E: I have not seen the community house, but I will see it. I'm impressed at the number of young Indians who are on the move, so to speak. Some of them have a good education, some of them have good jobs, and they are moving out to the forefront. And you know some of those same kind of Indians, don't you?
- O: Right. Yes, and I think that's not only typical of the Indians; it's typical of any young person today. Well, I say young person, I'm speaking of anybody below my age—thirty-seven—who comes out of a background implanted in them by their parents to better yourself. And I think our society as a whole turns every one of us to that train of thought of improving ourselves and our traditions. And I think this is what happened to the Indians; many of them moved out and started doing this.
- E: Do you think they are completely absorbed in the White community, as though they have no racial identity? As I visit the school so often, not a single child will admit they are Indian, and yet, I know they're Indian by their name or by their characteristics. But the school records do not show there are a large number of Indians at all.



O: Well, really, there is no true Indian blood—full Indian blood—in the Catawba Indians now. Eventually, I'd say another generation—perhaps the next generation—will look back on some of our history and come to appreciate the fact that they had Indian blood within their ancestors. But I think at this point in time, we have discriminated against them so much to the degree that they find that if they can do our way and dress and act and behave our way, then they can be accepted in certain areas of society. And so, I think we all conform to society in that degree, and the Indian has tried to do this. And in the process, they lose their own identity.

E: It's strange to me that there was no basket making on the reservation. They had beads, they had pottery, they had their arrowheads, but they never made any baskets, as far as I know.

O: All right. The Catawba Indians were not basket makers; that's one thing that very few people realize. The basket making is mostly attributed to the Cherokee Indian. The Catawba Indians were agricultural. They formed their bowls out of potteries. They used rocks to grind the corn. They carried in bowls that they had fired in a mud-type firing oven. They would make their carrying products, and they did this for the simple reason that when one part of the land gave out as far as producing, they were able to move to another part. And if a piece was broken or anything, it could be just disregarded. Therefore, they did not have that much to carry with them to settle into another area.

E: You saw in their homes the individual mortars where they ground corn up. Have you ever seen a great large one that they used for a community or for several families?

O: No, I have not seen a great large one; I've seen several small ones.

E: There's one over near Neely's Creek Church, out in the woods, down near a spring, and they camped at the top of the hill. They had a big piece of wood tied to a branch of a tree that they'd come down to pound the corn; and they pounded the corn, and you can still see the groove where the corn was scooped out or poured out the side. It's the only one I've ever seen.

O: Most of my discovery's been with the individual grinding stones, where they ground the corn, and they were not all that big.

E: No, that's right. Do you have any prediction about the future of the relationship between the Whites and Indians?

O: I'm afraid that through the process of what's happening over the debate over the land that, of course, there's not the harmony between the White man and the Catawba Indians. I think once, though, this is settled, I hope to be able to see a better relationship. The thing of it is, though, in the process that once it's settled—and as I stated earlier, with the younger generation, you're gonna find more and more of loss of identity of who they are. They will begin to move out—college, schooling, and so forth. This will cause them to move away from there and begin to fall into society and become mixed with it.

E: I'm very much interested in the articles you have written and your new book that's coming out. I hope that now that some of your words and manuscripts are

in the University of Florida that you'll remember us when you write something and speak again, and you'll have a chance to add to your own collection there.

O: I will consider it very much so. Actually, hopefully, I have given some information to Lancaster, I know already, and I would like to be able to give some to Rock Hill. The biggest thing at this point in time, I have not let go of some of what I consider the very valuable pieces, due to the fact that I hope to wait to someday, whenever I will be able to publish this book, and then let that be donated. But until the book is published, I would not release any of it because it would— someone else could take this and do the book themselves.

E: That's right. But now, we want the book. When your book comes out, we'll watch the newspapers and the write-ups, or you let us know.

O: Well, I'm afraid it'll be a number of years even yet, okay. I haven't experienced the turmoil. We tried to deal with several publishing companies [inaudible 19:29]. Having dealt with several publishing companies as well as South Carolina about publishing this book, we found how difficult it was due to the fact that, at that point in time, we had already, they considered, enough information on the Catawba Indians. And so, you did not have a buying public at that time for it. I feel like today, you've got a better buying public because of what's being stirred up with the Catawba Indians over the land dispute.

E: Well, we're very interested in that book, and I hope you're going to have it published soon.

[End of interview]

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