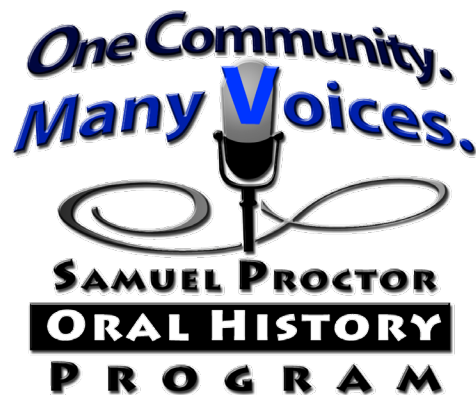


David Lesslie

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-125**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
July 13, 1976**



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CAT 125 David Lesslie
Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
Interviewed by Emma Reid Echols on July 13, 1976
16 minutes | 10 pages

Abstract: David Lesslie, a locomotive engineer, remembers working at his uncle's country store as a child and its customers. He speaks about people who taught on the reservation and worked at a railroad company in the area. Lesslie shares a story about a drunk worker at the Southern Railroad and recalls what the reservation looked like when he was younger. He remembers playing baseball with and against Catawba players growing up and speaks about some of them. Lesslie discusses riding the ferries along the Catawba River and closes the interview by commenting on the changes in the community over the years.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Poverty; Sports]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
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University of Florida

CAT 125

Interviewee: David Lesslie

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: July 13, 1976

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Rock Hill, South Carolina, Route 6, Box 260. I'm recording the oral history of the Catawba Indians. This is July 13, 1976. I'm visiting in the home of Mr. David Lesslie. David, will you give me your full name and address?

L: I'm David Lesslie. My address is Route 1, Catawba.

E: Now, David, you've always lived at Catawba, haven't you?

L: Yes.

E: This used to be Catawba Junction, which it's still called. It was a large railroad center. What's your job on the railroad now?

L: I'm a locomotive engineer on the Seaboard Coast Line.

E: Now, David has some interesting memories. I remember, of course, the big country store in this little village that was operated by his uncle, Mr. Will Simpson. And David, as a young boy, delivered groceries back on the reservation. David, what was your means of transportation there? How did you go?

L: Well, it was a Model A Ford. I was always real anxious to have a chance to drive a car, so Uncle Will had some groceries to deliver over on the Indian reservation, I was more than anxious to take 'em over there.

E: You were just a little boy at that time, about how old?

L: I don't know. I imagine about twelve.

E: Now, your uncle had a great big store with many different kind of things. Tell me some of the things he'd have in that country store.

L: Well, he had fresh meat that most country stores didn't have then. He had a cooler in the back of the store, well insulated—a walk-in cooler with ice buried in sawdust to keep the fresh meat cool, and he had fresh fish he got every week, stuff like that.

E: Do you remember any of the kinds of things the Indians would want to buy?

L: No, nothing in particular.

E: They would probably buy staple things. They wouldn't have any way of preserving meat, either.

L: No.

E: What was the condition of the roads on the Indian reservation?

L: Well, there's dirt roads, and of course when it was raining it was awful hard to get in and out. Dusty. No surface-treated road anywhere.

E: You only delivered this during summertime because you went to school, of course, in the wintertime.

L: That's right.

E: Did Mr. Simpson have anyone else to help him in delivery?

L: Well, he did. He had two other men there that delivered, but I don't know anything about that part of it. I just remember going to the Indian reservation.

E: Sometimes these Indians would come into the store and buy things, and sometimes you would just deliver them. Did you ever know how they paid your uncle for their groceries?

L: No, I don't know whether they paid him when they came, or whether they ever paid him or not. I was just interested in driving the car; that was all.

E: Exactly the thing a young boy would want to do.

L: Yes, ma'am.

E: Now, of course, you remember E.G. Hill, who made a tape for us, and his father, Dr. Hill. Do you remember Dr. Hill at all?

L: I remember him some, barely remember.

E: He, of course, was a famous doctor among the Catawba Indians and he lived in this village also at Catawba Junction. As you grew older, David, you went to school for a while in Winthrop College—went to training school, I believe—and you rode into school with a lady who was a teacher at the Indian reservation, Mrs. Sparks. Now, we don't know anything much about Mrs. Sparks, but you remember her. Tell me what sort of a person Mrs. Sparks was.

L: I know she was half-German. She was an awfully hard-working woman. She kept a cow and she was always moving the cow from one place to another. And she always had a big garden, buttermilk and all that stuff. The railroad men, at one time, used to eat lunch with her and she had an enormous meal every day.

E: What do you know about her as a teacher?

L: Well, I didn't know she taught at the Indian reservation. But I know when her son and I went to school together for a couple of years trying to improve our grammar, I know that she was always correcting us or helping us with our grammar.

E: When she went to church, did she find any errors in the minister's sermon?

L: Oh, yes. I remember a lot of times she'd say that he used the wrong word.

- E: In our records we do have that Mrs. Sparks was a teacher at the Indian reservation and her husband taught for her for several months. I don't know exactly how long. Mr. Sparks worked on the railroad, too?
- L: He worked on the Southern Railroad in Rock Hill and he'd come home probably once a month. I don't know what department he was in up there, but—
- E: He had a job of addressing mail, **I'm sure to go forward**. Did he write his pretty handwriting?
- L: I have seen his handwriting lots of times. It was real pretty handwriting.
- E: I am told by the Indians that he taught some of them penmanship. He was very proud of his beautiful handwriting, and that is remembered down on the reservation. I think he taught there only a few months. Now, some of the Indians did find intoxicating liquors to drink. What kinds of whiskey would they drink? What kinds of things would they drink?
- L: Well, I heard they drank bay rum a whole lot because it's too expensive to buy anything else. It was swallowing a hair tonic in a way, but they did drink a lot of bay rum.
- E: David, I believe there was one Indian that had a job down here, and he got drunk in Rock Hill and was not able to come on his job. Will you tell me about that Indian?
- L: Five or six years ago one of the Indians worked at the Southern Railroad, and like I do, they worked the Bowater job at night. I work it in the daytime for the Seaboard. Anyway, he was drunk one night when they were supposed to go to work at midnight and they couldn't get him on the train in Rock Hill, so they came

on without him. Later on in the night, he waked up and came down and thought he would just catch up on what he hadn't done, I guess. He just threw switches all over the yard until the Bowater guard went out there and made him quit. He said, "Well, I'll quit after I throw one more switch." I think the Southern officials were down here by that time and they ran him off.

[Break in recording]

E: David, what do you remember about the houses on the reservation? What kind of houses did they have?

L: I remember that they were small houses, and they were high off the ground—I remember that part—and scattered around in the reservation. I don't think you could hardly see one house from another then, as well as I remember. The road twisted and turned, but they were back in the woods and the shade, I guess.

E: Did they have the houses painted?

L: No, I don't remember any painted houses.

E: Did you see the school as you drove back on the reservation?

L: Yes, I remember seeing the old school—

E: What did the old schoolhouse look like?

L: Well, it just looked like one great big room.

E: The school that you remember, was it at the foot of a hill near the old church or was it halfway up that hill?

L: I remember the one at the foot of the hill some but the one I remember best is up, you know—

E: Now, the one at the foot of the hill that you remember was the first one. It was just one room. And then halfway up the hill was the second one, which was one room and then later added a second room and a third room. And so, you remember that. Do you remember any of the teachers on the reservation besides Mrs. Sparks? Mrs. Spencer taught there for a while, from Catawba Junction, and also Mrs. Ernest Patton taught for a short time. You remember those people?

L: I remember those people, but I didn't realize that they taught over at the Indian reservation.

E: You, as a young boy, would like to play games, and I know you were a good ball player. Did you have any games with the Indians?

L: Oh, yes. Ever since I can remember—I guess like most boys—I wanted to be a professional baseball player. And we played against the Indians some and played here at Catawba. We played once or twice over at the Indian reservation, but their field was so unlevel that you could hardly see the right fielder from home plate. So, we played at Catawba most of the time. Later on, I guess I played with the Indians against other teams more than I played just against an Indian team. I have played a lot. I played one summer with one—Regular, I called him Regular—he was a pitcher, Doug Harris, and we played in the county league one summer. Played twice a week.

E: Now, Doug Harris, I believe, is not living, but he was considered one of the finest Indians. Did you find him a very fine person?

L: Yes, ma'am. I sure did.

E: The groups that played, was there any feeling between the Whites and the Indians, or did you all get along very, very well?

L: We got along very, very well. We got along better with them than we did some of the other White teams that we played. We never did have any fusses that I know of.

E: Do you remember the names of any of the boys you played ball with?

L: Well, I played with Doug and Landon George and Marvin George more than anybody else. But I remember some, one they called Sky Eagle Brown. He was a catcher, but he was a little older than I was. He had quit and played a few games after I started. He was a catcher, I remember him saying he could squat down behind the plate and never get up and throw like a bullet to second base.

E: They were fast runners, weren't they?

L: Very fast. Except for one or two of 'em. Most I played with were just as fast as they could be.

E: Did any of you ever get hurt in the ball games?

L: No, we didn't but I know before I started playing they said that Marvin George, I believe it was, pitching against some team and threw a fast ball at a boy and hit the boy in the back of the head and killed him. That was several years before I started playing.

E: Now, you live not too far from the Catawba River and you remember the bridges but you remember also the old ferries along the Catawba River. Tell me about those ferries that you crossed over, I'm sure many a time.

L: When I was a small boy they had one ferry they called the Brown ferry, or the Hooton or the Cureton Ferry, I believe it was. It was down the river toward the Lancaster County line. Later on, when I went to work at the railroad, I worked out of Monroe, North Carolina, and in order to get to work, I had to go over the ferry. Or at least I wanted to go over it every morning because it wasn't but twenty-six miles to Monroe there that way and forty-one around by the bridges. One of the Indians and his grandson ran the ferry most all of that time until they put in a highway bridge. It was Early Brown and his grandson, Howard. It was very much of a problem to get him up to get him down there so I could get to work on time. A lot of times, I just take the flat over myself and pull it back up after I got off and let it come back to this side of the river and he'd go get it after he got up.

E: The current would bring it back to the other side?

L: Yeah, the current of the river. You'd pull it up on one end and the current would help shove and it would shove it almost to the bank on the other side.

E: Did you have to pay to cross the river?

L: No, the state highway department owned it then most of the time.

E: Was Early Brown an industrious person, or was he rather lazy?

L: He was rather lazy.

E: He was quite an interesting character, though. Then there was there another ferry above that one?

D: No, that was the upper ferry.

E: Did you remember John Brown, who once operated that ferry too?

D: I don't believe I remember John Brown.

- E: They tell me that around that Cureton ferry they once had a garden and fruit trees. Did you ever remember that?
- D: No, I don't.
- E: It may be not so. Did you ever go fishing with any of the Indian boys?
- D: No, I never did go fishing. I've had Early Brown to give me fish sometime and maybe an old duck or something they'd kill down in the wintertime on the river.
- E: Well, they were famous fisher—they had to fish because they didn't have enough meat in their food. Do you remember the poverty of the people—of course, we've all lived through the Depression, but the Indians were affected more than anybody else probably. Do you remember the poverty of the people when they went around selling pottery fifteen to twenty-five cents trying to make a living?
- D: No, Mrs. Echols, I don't remember much about that because all of us were in poverty then.
- E: [Laughter] Well, your parents would remember. Your mother, I'm sure, would remember that more. David, you remember a Landrum George? I believe you played ball with him. What do you remember about him?
- D: I believe Landrum was, of all the ball players that I played with—Indians—he was a major league prospect. I remember one time he went to Charlotte to try out the Charlotte Hornets who were in the Southern League with Jacksonville and Augusta, some of them other teams. They wanted to sign him up, but he came back home and his mother didn't want him to leave home, so he just never did play. He just wouldn't sign a contract to play professional ball.

E: Well, he's a fine-looking person. I believe he's retired now. Now, he married Chief Blue's daughter. Did Chief Blue attend any of your ball games?

D: Oh, yes. He came to most all the games. Lots of times he'd have his costume on and he would do some dancing around. Especially when that team was doing real good, he'd make a lot of noise and dance.

E: He was famous for that war whoop, wasn't he?

D: Yes, you could hear him all over the place.

E: David, have you seen many changes in the Indians since you have known them?

D: Oh, yes. A whole lotta changes. Their homes are a whole lot prettier, they dress a lot better, and drive nice automobiles. They didn't do then or didn't have very nice homes then.

E: We're all glad to see them making progress and I know you are too.

D: Yes, ma'am.

[End of interview]

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