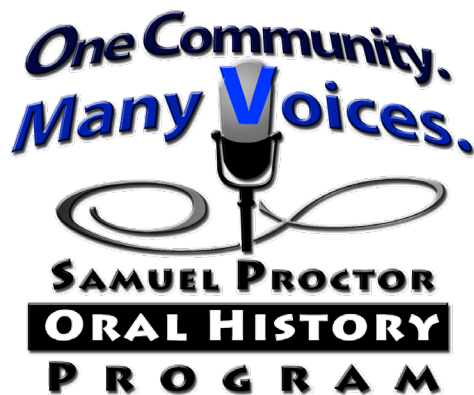


Chief Gilbert Blue

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-169**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
September 7, 1992**



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16 minutes | 9 pages

Abstract: Chief Gilbert Blue is the grandson of Chief Sam Blue and the current Chief of the Catawba Tribe. At the request of Emma Echols, Chief Blue explains some of the positive changes that have occurred for the Tribe, like improved job prospects and better relations with the outside communities. He celebrates his Tribe's tenacity and his proud of the younger generation who have been able to go off to college and get high skilled jobs. He believes that now, people are more interested in forming a good relationship with the Catawba Tribe, and that they acknowledge the benefits that his people can bring to the community. At the time of the interview, Chief Blue was working on finalizing a settlement agreement worth ninety million dollars, which would go to benefit the Tribe and its members. He is hopeful for the future and looks forward to serving the community for many more years.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; North Carolina--Charlotte; Land tenure; Communities]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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CAT 169

Interviewee: Chief Gilbert Blue

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: September 7, 1992

E: This is Emma Echols from Charlotte, North Carolina, 5150 Sharon Road. I am visiting in the home of Chief Gilbert Blue, the present Chieftain of the Catawba Nation. And around the room, I wish you could see it instead of me telling you about it. It's a beautiful home. His wife, Elizabeth, is a beautiful lady, and she loves flowers and the evidences of that beauty and flowers is all around. Then the family life is very close to the Catawba Indians and on the wall are not only pictures of his ancestors, but also pictures of his family, his children, his grandchildren. That's a part of the Indian heritage. Chief Blue is here to tell us some of the things that have happened recently. Years ago, I came and made the first little tape of him, and he went to the closet and picked up a little drum and said, "I'll play a little—with my little boy's drum." His boy has grown to manhood now, of course, but he's still playing and singing and speaking and still doing a tremendous work with the Catawba Indians. So, I'm going to hand the microphone over to him and let him tell you the changes that have taken place recently.

B: Thank you, Mrs. Echols. It's good to have you in my home again today. As you have alluded to, I can remember the first visit that we had, and I can remember that you and I also have visited church together. You had your historical records and pictures that you showed to people as I did some Indian dances and sang some songs for them. In recent years, there has been a lot of changes in the Catawbas' way of life. When I grew up on the reservation, of course, most of the education that we got was in a little framed schoolhouse that I went to 'til the

seventh grade. Times were very bad for the people. The income was real low, the housing was inadequate, but they were a people that were strong in the heart and didn't mind work. So we, over these years, have managed to raise ourselves to a level of economics that has bettered our lives considerably. One thing that I am real proud of about my people is their tenacity to hang in and to not give up. Therefore, we have persevered until this particular day. In recent years, we have a lot of Catawba youth who have gone to college. We have a dentist among our people now. We have several attorneys. We have several people who are in the nursing profession. We have people who are craftsmen, like electricians, machinists, pipefitters, welders, and carpenters. So, among the Catawba people now in recent years we have a number of craftsmen that can do just about anything that we need to do on our reservation. Also, the acceptance in the neighborhood is something that I'm real pleased with. There were many years that the people knew about the Catawbas, and that's about all. They would say, "Yes, we have some Catawbas down on the river," and that would be about it. When it came to activities in the neighborhood such as parades, for a long, long time, we were not invited. It might have been just an oversight. But in recent years, when our Come-See-Me festival comes to Rock Hill every spring, we have been invited to not only participate in the parade but we have also been asked to perform for our local people and any visitors our Indian dances. I do a blowgun demonstration. The community, I think, has a greater awareness of the Catawbas now than they have ever in our history. I think they're aware of the contributions that we have made to the settlement of this part of the country. It's

a real pleasure to me to know that our relationship has been real good with the community. The non-Indian people have always been friendly to us. Of course, there have always been those individuals who, for whatever the reasons, would look on the Catawbas in a different light than some of the others. But there were very few in comparison to the others. A lot of educators over the years have taken great interest in the Catawbas. I'm very thankful that when I went to grammar school on the reservation the teacher who taught me was really concerned about giving me a basic background of education. It's been a big help to me in my leadership years with the Catawba people.

E: Who was it? What was the name of the teacher?

B: Mrs. Frances Hoague, who lived in the River Bend area above of the—not too far from the Catawba Reservation, actually. She came down every morning real early, and I would go down with her and build a fire in the old potbelly stove. She would teach the Catawba children. She took a great interest in them, and for her I'm very grateful. Later on, as I went into high school, the teachers were aware of where I was from and the other Indian children, and they took a great interest in helping us as well. So, the educators in the area have been a big help in getting our people to have a better education and a better understanding of the goals in life that we hope to achieve. I guess in recent years the biggest thing that's been a blessing to me, I guess, is that the people in the community have understood that we have an important part to play in the community life, that we're not separated from the community just because we're Catawba people. We have always worked off the reservation. We have participated in the various activities.

We've had ball teams that's played people within the community. We have a good rapport with those people, and so I'm grateful for this. So, I guess those are the basic things that I can remember in recent years that have changed the Catawbas' way of life, is our better education, better jobs. And now, with the suit that we have had lingering over these hundred-and-some years, have finally come to just about a conclusion. We have a few details to work out on our claims settlement, but once that is done, there will be monies in the bank. We will have our restoration to federal recognition, and there will be many programs and opportunities that will be forthcoming to the Catawba people. Mainly, higher education, again, better health care, and all the other programs that we can use to make us a better people and better members of our community. With these things coming into play now, we are going to be, I think, a bigger asset to our community, not a detriment. Most of the leaders in the community, from the mayor, from the people in the chamber of commerce, and the leaders in industry, they recognize that the Catawbas are going to be a very—a focal point in the economy of the area. We're going to be able to build businesses. We'll have shops and things on the reservation that people can come and see and share our culture and our traditions with us. So, we're real excited about the future years. We think with this settlement coming to a conclusion that the awareness of the Catawbas will be even greater than it has been in the past, and we're looking forward to a greater and friendlier relationship with our people.

E: And will you tell us, who will be in charge of distributing the money and deciding what things it will be used for? And will there be a place to display your artifacts,

and your old pictures, and the old records that we have? We have a wonderful history working with the University of Florida. We have many things to turn over to you all when there is a place available. Who will be in charge of deciding where and how this money will be used?

B: According to what you have read in the paper, the settlement package is about ninety million dollars' worth. Fifty million of that is in cash, and forty million is in the kind of services that the state will help us to achieve. Things like water-sewer hookup, and roads, and many different things that they will contribute that will make up the forty million in-kind. As far as the determination as to what monies will be used for what, that will be determined in the final resolution that we will adopt in probably the first part of December of this year. Then, once we decide what monies we are going to use, we will put it in educational funds. There will be money for per capita division. But the money that's going to be divided for individual people will be very minimal. In other words, we're not going to take a lot of money out of that fifty million and divide it up. We're going to use most of that money for businesses, for education, for housing, and for other things on the reservation. There will be a small percentage that will be divided among the people, but that will be the choice of the federal government and the Tribe. We will vote together to decide how we want to use that money.

E: For our record, will you tell us the name of the officers?

B: Right now, in the Catawba leadership role, we have myself as the Chief; Fred Sanders, who is my assistant Chief; Carson Blue is the secretary/treasurer; Buck George is a committee member. We have also on our committee Dewey Adams,

we have Wilford Harris, and we have Foxx Ayers, and Claude Ayers. These men make up the Tribal executive committee as it is constituted presently. We have many pottery makers that exist today that have been living for—some of them are older ladies that have been around a long time making pottery, and they know a little bit about the history and the things of the Catawba Nation like. Evelyn George is one of our older ladies. Mildred Blue is one of the ladies who's—I don't want to say old people, because they aren't. They are young in spirit, but they have some years that they have accumulated here upon the earth. But in those years, they've attained a lot of the things that would make our people recognizable down through the years as far as pottery is concerned. We have some younger people now. Like my daughter, for instance, Denise Hyatt. She's taking pottery classes and already made several pieces that are really nice work. Evelyn George has praised her as going to be a real nice pottery maker one of these days. So, we haven't lost our desire to keep our culture and our traditions alive. Ms. Echols has also asked me about what we intend to do about a place to keep the artifacts and things that several people in the community have offered to give to us once we find a place where we can secure them. Presently, we have a community building on the reservation with a gym and a front part that's used for office work. We also have an old schoolhouse that used to be where people went to school on the reservation. It's been moved down next to the community building. We're in the process now of renovating that building, and someday it will be used also to house some of these artifacts. But with this settlement coming to a conclusion, we intend to add on to our old community

building some other rooms that can be used as a museum, as workshops. And in those places, we will have a library where we can secure these things that people want to give us and things that we ourselves have accumulated. There, we can let people come in and look at 'em in the building or they'll be able to check some of these things out and take them and look at them in their homes or in the schools and various other places.

E: Gilbert, as I travel around, one thing I hear many so many times is stories about your grandfather, Chief Sam Blue. Do you remember—what do you remember especially about him?

B: I guess the biggest thing I remember about Grandfather is his willingness to work with people and to keep things on a harmonious relationship, even among his own people. The children that grew up on the reservation as I did—he corrected us all. He didn't worry about whether it was just his children or his grandchildren. Any Indian child on the reservation, he would counsel with them and try to correct them so that they would act in a proper way. But he was also a very religious man. He was a very spiritual person. He believed in asking the Lord to direct him in the affairs of his people. I think that's one of the reasons that his name is held in such high esteem today is that Grandfather was an honest man and a man of integrity, a man who believed in God and believed that God dealt with men and directed and guided them in the affairs of their lives. So, I guess his spirituality would be one of the things that's impressed me most.

E: It's been a joy to hear you. Anything else you want to add to this before I leave today?

B: I think that's basically it. I'm just real pleased about the interest that the people have shown in recent years in the Catawba people, and that they recognize that we do have something to contribute to the community and to our way of life. I'm looking forward to many years yet of serving with the people in the community and making this place a better place for all of us to be.

E: And most of all, I appreciate the friendship that you all have had for the Whites and the Whites have had for you. So, I say God bless you.

B: Thank you, Ms. Echols.

[Break in recording]

E: This is Emma Echols, 5150 Sharon Road, Charlotte, North Carolina. I'm working on the oral history of the Catawba Indians for the University of Florida. I've been visiting in the home of Gilbert Blue, and he just made a tape for me, and then I asked a significant question, I wanted to know about the peace and the harmony among the Catawbans in their settlement that took place a few days ago. And so, I asked him, was there unity and harmony? And so, Gilbert told me this: he said they were meeting downtown, about 450 of them. And there was many questions and many discussions in that large group, and then he got a call. He got a call from Frances Wade out on the reservation, and she said, "We've got a whole group here in the government building, and we are praying. We want you to come and pray with us. We're not asking questions or raising any discussion, we just want to pray." So, Gilbert said he left the meeting downtown in Rock Hill and went out to the reservation, and he found thirty-five or forty waiting to pray. And they all knelt down in a circle, and he led the prayer. Then he went back to the

meeting in Rock Hill. Then as the discussions and the plans for the settlement began, he said he felt something all over the group. There was a serenity and a peace and a harmony. And nothing—no way could they account for it, except the results of that prayer meeting down on the reservation. And so, he said, “There was peace and harmony in our Tribe.”

[End of interview]

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