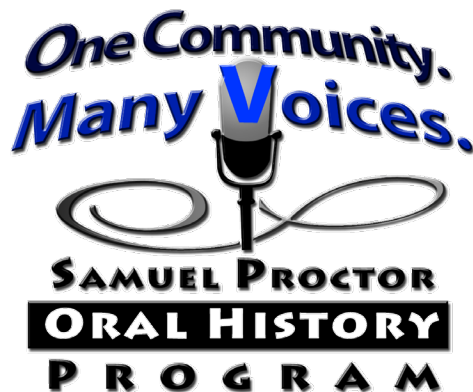


James T. Ferguson and Nell Ferguson

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-005**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
December 1971**



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19 minutes | 14 pages**

Abstract: Nell Ferguson and her husband, James T. Ferguson, speak about their life living alongside the Catawba people. Mrs. Ferguson taught at the Catawba School for two years alongside one other teacher and the principal. Oftentimes, the church served as a separate building for school activities, alongside general community gatherings such as Thanksgiving dinner. She then spoke about the now discontinued Brown Ferry, run by Early Brown (grandfather of Lawrence Howard George), and how Early Brown himself was very accommodating. She then spoke about her Catawba tenants, the family of one Moroni George with his wife and seven children. The George family taught the Fergusons how to forage for creasy greens and spicewood tea, along with crayfish. Mr. Ferguson speaks about his experience playing with Catawba children growing up, and the annual stew gathering they would invite people to when they received their yearly allowance from the government. He also spoke about how highly he thought of Early Brown, as he would always give him a ride to his ball games. He then speaks about hunting with them, the Great Flood of 1916, and one of his Catawba employees: David Canty. Finally, he speaks about how hospital fees were paid for by the government and how the land was sold to the government.

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

CAT 005

Interviewees: James T. Ferguson and Nell Ferguson

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: December 1971

E: [inaudible 0:02] Rock Hill, South Carolina, and I'm recording the oral history of the Catawba Indians. I'm visiting in the home of Mrs. Ferguson. Will you tell me your full name and your address?

NF: My name is Nell Ferguson, Mrs. J. T. Ferguson. We live at Route 1, Box 11, Catawba, South Carolina.

E: Now who were you before you married?

NF: I was Nell Lineberger and I taught school, the primary grades, the first two grades at the Catawba School in 1937 and [19]38. And I was married in [19]38 but I taught on [19]38 and [19]39, those two years.

E: Now I believe Mr. Willard Hayes was the principal at that time, and you taught the younger children. Is that right?

NF: Yes ma'am, the first two grades.

E: Tell us about that Indian school. Do you remember at all how many students you had or anything about your teaching?

NF: I think there were about sixteen children. I might can find some papers somewhere, but I haven't taken time to look yet. If I do, I will give them to you. But I think there were about sixteen children in the first and second grades. And my room was tiny, it was about eight by ten. [Laughter] It was heated by a tiny little coal heater. And windows on both sides. It was well lighted because both sides were pure window. Mr. Hayes's room was about four times as large, had a little porch on the front that had a shelf that held the water bucket, and naturally his heater was bigger. It also had a little stage about one step up, about eight

feet out, for their little programs, the morning devotionals and things like that. But usually when you had a big program, where you invited the town, we went down to the little church. Particularly went down to the church when Mrs. Lawrence or the people from Winthrop Training School would prepare. For instance, Thanksgiving dinner, they prepared turkey and homemade rolls and all the fixings and bring them out to share Thanksgiving dinner with the little Indians. We'd go down to the church for that so there'd be room for everybody.

E: That was a wonderful thing to do. Now, the water on that little porch, did you get it from the spring or from the well?

NF: I was thinking it came from the spring, but I'm pretty sure it came from Chief Blue's well, that well that is still there.

E: The fires in your rooms, did you have a janitor make those in the early morning or did you have to worry about that when you got to school?

NF: We did that when we got to school. We went over a rutty, hilly, red road, and in those days we didn't even have anti-freeze in the car. You should try going to school when it was freezing and your radiator boiling over and you dare not stop to help your neighbor who couldn't even get their car started.

E: Did the children walk to school, or did you pick up some of them sometimes?

NF: Yes, sometimes, but they all lived rather close, and they would run home for lunch. They all lived within walking distance, and they'd run home for lunch. Now I say that, yes, they did go home for lunch, but my two grades finished at lunch and I came home at lunch. But I imagine all of them came back after they ate, too.

E: Now remember Lawrence and the group from Winthrop would bring their Thanksgiving dinner out. Would there be plenty of room in the church for all of you to eat in the church?

NF: Oh yes. Yes. They would sing and the little Indians would sing back to them and they would have games. I don't believe Mrs. Lawrence came with those at all, with those people. I think it was the Winthrop Training School teachers who did that. I can't remember their names. Brother Hayes will have to tell you that.

E: Now the old church is gone. Maybe you remember what it looked like on the inside, do you remember about the old church?

NF: Yes, it was cement block. It had a center aisle and it wasn't elaborate at all; it was just a building, had two heaters, one on each side up towards the front.

E: I believe it was painted white on the outside, was it not?

NF: Yes, it was.

E: And it was the first thing you saw from the top of the hill way out in the valley, that white and green church.

NF: That's right.

E: Now, you live not far from the Indian ferry. Will you tell me about the Indian ferry that you knew so well here and the Indians who lived close by here?

NF: Well, Early Brown had a big family, and he ran the ferry and was always an obliging friend and neighbor of ours. Early used to take the ferry across when you needed. He didn't stop at the end of twelve hours. Whenever you came and needed to cross, you yelled, you clapped your hands and yelled, even in the

middle of the night, he would come and help you across. He was just a plain good neighbor.

E: Now which ferry was this?

NF: That was the old Brown Ferry near the Southern Railroad trestle.

E: It's been gone quite a long time, hasn't it?

NF: Yes, and even the later ferry that's called Ashe's Ferry is discontinued now that we have this new highway bridge.

E: Do you have any idea why it was called the Brown Ferry?

NF: No, unless there were some people who were called that. I don't remember.

E: Mrs. Ferguson, I believe you had some Indian tenants that lived on your place, on your plantation. Will you tell me about those Indian tenants?

NF: One in particular, well, Moroni George and his wife had seven children. There were seven in ours, and we kinda matched up. But one thing I remember most about Moroni naturally was all his children and the hard work he had to do to make a living in those days. Moroni could spot a squirrel way up in a tree when we couldn't even see the limb, and not only could he spot it, he could shoot it. He would really. Different things like that that the Indians could do that plain White people wouldn't even consider. That family taught us how to find creasy greens. Their children would go down in the bottoms and bring out an apron full of creasy greens. The creasy greens were bigger than a dinner plate, just like that. And they taught us how to make spicewood tea. It grew along the creek down at the spring. There were two springs that served our place there and we used them for water in the house most of the time. Those little children also taught us how to—

guess you'd call it miniature lobster—how to take crawfish and boil them and have a picnic just of their own, make spicewood tea and crawfish down around the spring without the mothers helping them prepare any of the things.

E: Now what about the spicewood tea, tell me about that.

NF: It was a special kind of tree that grew along the spring. I would recognize it now, but I haven't seen any lately. It has a little yellow bloom in the early spring and that's when the tea is best, like sassafras tea is better in the early spring.

E: You boil it and drink it hot?

NF: Yes.

[Break in recording]

E: You were telling me about the food the little Indians taught you to prepare down by the spring, the crawfish and the tea. Did you cook your food down there by the spring?

NF: Yes, we had washpots, that was the laundry area, and we had a place to make a fire. They could make a fire real well, they knew what kind of twigs to build the fire with. But we prepared the crawfish and it looked like miniature lobster. And the spicewood, I believe we broke the tips off of the twigs when they had new life in the spring, just the little buds beginning to turn yellow, and we made the spicewood tea like that.

E: Then how did you serve that food?

NF: Oh, we played real Indians and you'd dig chips out of the big tree down there that they cut for us.

E: Did the Indian children ever sing any of their songs and did you ever hear them talk any of their language?

NF: No, not those. Not those. The only time I heard that was when I went over to the school with Brother Hayes and the children were trying to keep it alive and I would hear it then. Those were my first Indian songs.

E: The group of Winthrop teachers who came down, do you remember any of the Winthrop teachers who came down to help serve your Thanksgiving dinner at the school?

NF: No, Mrs. Echols, I'm sorry but I just can't remember. I just can't remember them.

E: Most of the Indians are living on the reservation or near the reservation, you don't have any nearby at Catawba any longer, do you?

NF: No.

[Break in recording]

E: Mr. Ferguson, I'm so glad you've come in, tell us your full name.

JF: I'm James T. Ferguson.

E: Now you remember a lot about the Indians, forty and fifty years ago. Tell us about what you remember about these Indians.

JF: Well, I used to like to go up there and play with them. I lived real close to them and I didn't have much other people to play with. We had to play with somebody, and they were good playmates. They were always nice to me, and they would get their money to have a stew, they'd always invite me up.

E: Well, about their money, how much money was it?

JF: **Recollect** it was ten dollars for each child. Of course, that was a pretty good deal of money back forty years ago, but it wasn't much either. But I mean back them times, they'd have a little money.

E: And they'd invite you and some other of their White friends?

JF: Yes ma'am. That's because they lived around them all their life. Frank Basset, and he would go. He lived right over here and all, we played ball with them, and one day they'd have us up there every year they'd get that money.

E: Now Mr. Ernest Patton had a ball team. Did you play on that ball team?

JF: Yes, I played a little bit on it.

E: Who were some of the Indians that played on that ball team?

JF: Well there was Albert Sanders and Leroy Blue and ...

F: Landrum George.

JF: Landrum George and a great many of them. But Early Brown, the one who runned the ferry, was the one I thought so much of. He would take me to the ball game when we would go off to Richburg or Landrum or play here, I could always get a ride with him, that's the reason I thought so much of him.

E: Early Brown is no longer living?

JF: No, ma'am.

E: What about his family?

JF: Well, a couple of his sons are dead, but he's got two or three still living.

E: He's the one that ran the ferry.

JF: That ran the ferry, yes.

E: At the river.

JF: Yes.

E: The Indians were never much farmers, were they?

JF: No, ma'am, they didn't farm. They'd work a little garden and they didn't farm much. But they would cut a lots of wood for people.

E: Did you go hunting with any of the Indian boys, and were they good hunters?

JF: I like to hunt and went several times. They were good hunters and every night the hunting left, they'd clear more than their part. We'd all be a part of it. We'd go bird hunting with them, and I even went duck hunting with them a good deal. They knew the river good, must have cause they lived right on it. I always thought they were good neighbors.

E: I'm sure you remember the Flood of 1916 when all the bridges were washed away. What part did the Indians take in running the ferry then?

JF: Well, back then, we just had that other one ferry down yonder. That had been discontinued way before they started this the second one. This one was the one that went through Catawba to Langford that-a-way, down by the road. When they built a new road up here to Asheville, built this road, they put a ferry up here. Early's daddy, Early Brown's daddy, run that one and it was all for to raise his daddy's chickens. Yes ma'am, I know when the 1916 big river and the railways came down and jump in there and after the bridge was washed away.

E: What kind of things came floating down the river here?

JF: Well, it was chicken houses and bales of cotton, I remember that well.

E: Some of the bales of cotton landed up on the ground down here, didn't they?

JF: Down at Landsford, where they got them islands.

E: Yes.

JF: That's where a man got drowned down there trying to get one.

E: Was that an Indian man or a White man?

JF: No, ma'am, that was a White man down there.

E: And I understand the Indians took their boats and ferried the people across the river for a number of days.

JF: Yes, for a long—oh, for months, they didn't get no ferry back there for a long time.

E: Who of the older people here would remember the Indians, or who would have any of the Indian arrowheads and artifacts, things like that?

JF: Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Lineberger knows a lot about them, 'cause he lived down there right close to that north end, and he knows a lot. I don't know who's got them there arrowheads. But I imagine there's one been in that still sells them up here, don't they?

E: I'm not sure. Now you worked at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company?

JF: Yes.

E: What about any Indians in your big plant? Are there any Indians working there that you know of?

JF: Yes, ma'am.

E: Who do you know that works?

JF: Who is the one we had on the... I believe Canty.

NF: David Canty.

JF: David Canty for one, and that's about all of them right there.

E: Do you find that they're good workers, or are they lazy on the job?

JF: Well, they're good workers. We got one of them, old Harris, that used to work there. He left and went to carpenter work and my man told me he'd rather him than two or three others because when he got ready to go get a piece of timber—he's big, stout—he'd go get it by himself and them others want two or three to help them.

E: They like carpenter work and they like mechanical work, but they don't like farming, is that correct?

JF: No ma'am, they don't like farming.

E: Do you remember any of the things you used to do together as boys in school? When you went to school, you went to a separate school from the Indians, didn't you?

JF: Yes, we went to a separate school.

E: Then when you went to high school, were there any Indians with you then?

JF: No, I don't think so.

E: Not then.

JF: At that time. No, they didn't get up there. They left this little old school, that's about as far as they went long time ago.

E: Now you watched the development of these Indians a long time. Do you think that they're being good citizens in our country, and do you think the future is bright for the ones who are working in industry and so forth now?

JF: I sure do.

[Break in recording]

E: Mr. Ferguson, tell me about the gardens the Indians used to have. Maybe they didn't have very many, but did they plant seed, have any gardens?

JF: Well, they'd have a few but they didn't like to work gardens too well because the rest of the Indians would kind of borrow from them too well. And they just figured that it wouldn't hardly pay them to do it. But some of them would have a good garden. They didn't seem to have no chickens, I didn't think the chickens would live up there after sundown.

E: So, they didn't have many chickens at all, what about cows? Did they have cows?

JF: There was about one or two of them that had some cows, a few of them had some mules, one family, what's that man down on the left's name?

NF: Idle Sanders.

JF: Idle Sanders used to have a good horse he rode.

E: What about the doctors for the Indians? I know you remember about the doctors for the Indians.

JF: Yes, ma'am, they had Dr. Hill for years. They'd come after him in a wagon and take him over there.

E: They took him in a wagon or—

JF: Took him in a wagon. They'd come over there in a wagon after him and take him over. I've seen him going along. Every day, some of them was coming after him, practically every day. Then after he died, Dr. Patton—

NF: Dr. Blackman.

JF: Dr. Blackman had them and then Dr. Patton had them for the last time at the river.

E: Now the flu epidemic of 1918 must have hit this area very badly cause so many Indian children and Indian families died then.

JF: Yes, ma'am, real, real bad. Lots of Indians and lots of colored people died with it then. Of course, lots of White people, too. We lost seven here on our place. We were lucky, there's a good many of us and we never did have it.

NF: Jimmy has Indian tenants just like we do.

JF: No, I mean colored people, we're talking colored people.

NF: I mean, you know.

JF: No, we never did.

NF: Okay.

JF: Dr. Hill had one or two work over there for him.

E: Most of the Indian children, I believe, were born in the homes and very few ever went to the hospital over there, but they remember their doctors and they remember their teachers very, very well.

[Break in recording]

E: Mr. Ferguson, years ago when the Indians were being looked after by the government, how much money would they get per person and what about their doctor bills?

JF: Well, I'm not real sure, but I think it was ten dollars for each child they had and they got that once a year and they got their doctor bills free and hospital bill free.

E: But what about medicine?

JF: I don't think the medicine was included. They just got the hospital bill and ten dollars a year, I think. It might have been twelve for each child, but I believe it was ten.

E: Do you think they were better off under the government, before the land was sold, or do you think they're better off now since they've sold the land?

JF: I believe they were better the other way because all of them, ninety percent of them that they gave the land to has sold it and done away with the money. Now they've lost their right to the hospital.

[End of interview]

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