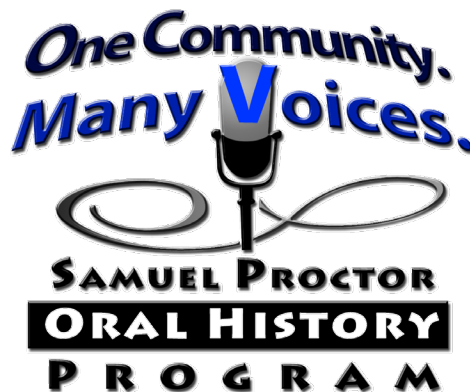


# **Jewel Shirley Harris Cookson**

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)  
CAT-137**

**Interview by:**

**Edith Frances Canty Wade  
August 20, 1976**



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**38 minutes | 18 pages**

**Abstract:** Jewel Cookson, raised on the Catawba reservation by her aunt and uncle, left school in seventh grade. Now, with eight children of her own, she reflects on her strict upbringing as it compares to the upbringing of her children. She also speaks about her identity as an Indian, the ridicule she experienced growing up, and the future of the Catawba people.

**Keywords:** [Catawba Nation; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Education; Communities]

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
**P R O G R A M**  
**University of Florida**

CAT 137

Interviewee: Jewel Shirley Harris Cookson

Interviewer: Edith Frances Canty Wade

Date of Interview: August 20, 1976

W: This is Frances Wade. I live on Route 3, Box 304, Rock Hill, South Carolina. I am gathering oral history of the Catawba Indians for the university. Today is August 20, 1976, and I am talking with Jewel Cookson. Jewel, what is your full name?

C: My name is Jewel Shirley Harris Cookson.

W: What is your present address?

C: I live at 8421 Coal Street, East St. Louis, Illinois.

W: What is your birthday?

C: August 24, 1928.

W: What is your husband's name?

C: Allan Herbert Cookson.

W: Is he an Indian?

C: No.

W: We'll talk about him just a little later on. How many children do you have?

C: We have eight.

W: Would you give me names and birth dates of each?

C: Our oldest one is Shirley Lynn Cookson Kline, and her birthday is June 4, 1950.

Her husband's name is James Patrick Kline, and she has a little boy—

W: He is not an Indian, is he?

C: He is not an Indian. She has a little boy, that's James Patrick Jr. Then the second girl is Beverly Allan Cookson Joiner, and she is also married to a White fellow, and his name is Ronald Joiner. They have a little boy, that's Jason Joiner.

Then we have Ricardo, the next oldest. His name is Ricardo Harris Cookson. He is married to a White girl, and her name is Brenda Faye Campbell. They don't have any children yet. We have Denise Renee Cookson Nash, and she's married to a White fellow from Kansas City, Missouri. They don't have any children as yet. Then there's Lisa Christine Cookson, and she has a little girl that's six months old, and her name is Amber Jewel Cookson. Then there's Robin Jolaine Cookson, who has just completed high school, and Victoria Von Cookson, who has two years of school left. And then we have a seven-year-old son, Christian Darrell Cookson. He's seven, and we enjoy him very much.

W: Who are your grandparents, Jewel? First on your mother's side, then your father's.

C: My mother's parents was Leonard Bone and Laura Jean Wilson Bone. And then my grandparents on my dad's side is Benjamin Perry Harris and Mary W. Cornelius George Harris.

W: All right, are both sets of parents Indian?

C: No, just my father.

W: From your father's side. Jewel, you tell me you live in Missouri—

C: Illinois.

W: Illinois. Were you born in Catawba?

C: I was born in Columbia, South Carolina, in the county of Richland. I was raised on the reservation.

W: Did your mother raise you? Did your parents raise you?

C: No, my mother died when I was four. I continued to live with my Grandmother

Bone until I was five, and then I was brought back to the reservation and was raised by an uncle and aunt, Robert and Isabel Harris.

W: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

C: I have a brother. His name is Joseph William Harris.

W: I know that you live far away from Catawba right now. How did you get so far away, and how did you meet your husband?

C: Well, I was visiting my mother's relatives one summer, and I happened to meet him, and he was in service. He came up on a weekend pass with a friend that was a friend of my cousin's that lived in Columbia, South Carolina. That's the way we met.

W: Why are you living so far away now?

C: Well, he could never find work here. We tried several times, and each time it was sort of discouraging to him, so we went back to Missouri, where he's from. But then we eventually moved to Illinois because I didn't like Missouri.

W: Do you work, Jewel?

C: No, not really, just housewife.

W: Well, you work.

C: Yeah. [Laughs]

W: What kind of work does your husband do?

C: We're owner-operators of a long-distance hauling firm, Missouri Meat. We haul meat from the Midwest to Florida and produce and vegetables—I guess fruits back is what you'd say.

W: Jewel, how much education did you get?

- C: I completed the seventh grade, and I went two months in the eighth grade.
- W: Do you know why you didn't go farther?
- C: Well, yes, because at that time the children were sort of downgraded, the Indians. Not all the kids, but some of the uppity kids. And I decided if I had to go to school with that kind of people, it wasn't worth going.
- W: You say that you lived with Isabell and Robert Harris. Did they object to you quitting school at that grade level?
- C: They wanted me to continue school, but I guess I discouraged them as much as I was discouraged in school, and they let me quit.
- W: How old were you at that time, Jewel?
- C: I was fifteen when I quit school.
- W: Did I ask you—I have forgotten—did I ask you how old you were?
- C: Yeah, I gave you my birthday.
- W: All right. Have all of your children, who are grown, have they completed at least high school?
- C: All of them that's completed, yeah. Our oldest daughter had about six months to go to school when she got married, and she was continuing school, but she got pregnant, and they said she couldn't go to school, so she went to SIU University at Edwardsville, Illinois. She has the equivalence of a high school diploma from—I can't remember what—
- W: If your child wanted to quit at an early age like you did, what would be your advice?
- C: To continue school.

W: Would it be mild advice, or would you very strongly urge?

C: Well, I would tell 'em—I've told my children the reason I quit school, and I've encouraged them to go to school, which—there's been several of them that's really upset with school, especially our seven-year-old; he just don't like the school, and I said, "Well, you've got years ahead of you, and you gonna complete school if you're twenty-one years old when you're still in the first grade." I encourage 'em, and so does my husband, that, you know, I'd let them make their own decision. It would have to be their decision to make. It wouldn't be mine. I'd tell them the disadvantages of not having a high school education or trying to go on to college to better themselves, but I think it would have to be up to them.

W: Do you not think that they would have to be of—you are responsible at least until they become a certain age?

C: Yes, out there in Illinois, they have to go to school until at least fifteen. As I say, we had one that was really discouraged, and she wanted to quit. She finished, and when she finished high school, she enjoyed it. We tried to encourage her to go on to college, but she figured we wouldn't be able to support her in college at the time. Now she says she wishes she had took our advice and went on to college.

W: Jewel, I know you grew up on the reservation, and I know there are many things that you could tell us about, things that happened when you were growing up. But is there anything in particular that sticks in your mind about the reservation or the people when you were growing up?

C: Well, the only thing I can remember really that I was really discouraged about, I can remember one Sunday we was right in the middle of eating dinner. And some tourists came through, and my dad tried to force me to go out and have my picture taken. I told him I wasn't a monkey, I didn't need my picture taken.

[Laughter] That's about the only thing that was, you know. Other than that, I enjoyed the reservation. And I tell my kids now, "Boy, I wish we was back on the reservation when the reservation was like it was before."

W: All right. Tell me about what the reservation was like when it was before.

C: Well, I enjoyed it.

W: I'm the same way, and I know what I thought was good about it, but I would like to hear what you think was really good about it.

C: We didn't have to have money like the kids do today to go out and have fun. We went out and dammed up the creeks and went swimming. We didn't have to spend money at the pool or the beaches to go swimming. I just enjoyed the type of life we had on the reservation. You felt free, you didn't feel like—like now, there's so many people in cities, they feel so cooped up. I didn't, I felt sort of free. I was, I guess, a happy-go-lucky kid because my uncle and aunt taught me to be happy-go-lucky.

W: They were exactly like that themselves, weren't they?

C: That's right.

W: Jewel, I know you real well, and I know there are just many things that you could tell of instances that you know that happened on the reservation. But when you were growing up, were you allowed to sit when the old people were talking, when



the elderly—well, not elderly, but grown-ups—were talking?

C: Well, no, not really. I mean, they didn't really discourage me like they had been discouraged to not talk, but I was encouraged not to talk when there was talk to be just adult talk. I was taught not to interrupt. That's a lot of fault of my kids today; I don't get through to them that you just don't go interrupting people whenever they're talking.

W: When you were growing up, what was the attitude of children toward parents and parents toward children?

C: I think the parents really was interested in the kids, and they didn't want 'em to really be hurt in any way. The things that they did was through love. There was a lot of things that I thought that my uncle and aunt was pretty strict about, but then, now that I'm grown and have my own family and grandchildren, I think back, you know, I should have raised my kids like I had been raised. They told me anyway that I shouldn't try and raise 'em the way I had been raised, but as I said, I thought there were certain things they were strict in that I really am glad now that they were because I could have things to go wrong with me, as a lot of kids having today, by not listening—where they think the parent's too bossy or something like that. I really am thankful that they raised me as strict as they did. And I feel like after I got older, since I was raised by an uncle and aunt, that they had a double responsibility. If I presented problems, it would have been, "Well, you know, her uncle and aunt raised her, it's their fault." But I enjoyed being raised the way I had been.

W: You talking about your parents being strict. I felt the same way. What were some

of the restrictions that you resented when you were growing up?

C: Well, after I got older, I remember I wasn't allowed to date. My uncle would say every time, "You don't have to go out with every Tom, Dick, and Harry. When God gets ready for you to find that mate, he'll be around." And I really sort of resented that, but then at the time I met my husband, I thought I was in love with somebody else. But after I met my husband, I found out that I wasn't really in love with this one guy as I thought I was. They didn't really approve of him, so maybe that's why I liked him or that's why I get told my oldest daughter's husband and I don't get along—that she married him because I didn't approve of him because of the type of person he was.

W: I was always resentful, I think, because we were not allowed to stay in the house when grown-ups were talking. I guess I was inquisitive and wanted to know what was going on, and I was never allowed to stay in while they were talking.

C: Well, I don't think I ever really got sent out while they were talking. Just, you don't open your mouth whenever grown-ups is talking, that was the only thing, unless you was asked something.

W: Do you think that the people who were growing up during the time that you grew up showed more respect for their parents? And the parents showed more concern for their children?

C: Well, we was just talking about that. A couple of weeks ago, we were home, and some of the children were here. I was talking about the difference, you know, how we raised the kids. And I said I didn't think my kids had the respect for me as I had for my parents. I still respect 'em, you know, their judgment and things.

It bothers me if I go and do something that I knew they wouldn't approve of or go to a place where they wouldn't approve of. It bothers me, and, well, I'm an adult, got children of my own and grandchildren, and it still bothers me if I go into a place that I knew they wouldn't have approved of when I was young.

W: How much education did you get, Jewel? I asked you that, didn't I? Where did you go to school?

C: I went most of the time on the Catawba reservation. And I guess I went about two years in the public schools.

W: Do you know who your teacher was at Catawba?

C: Well, there was Rhett Harris was a teacher once, and—

W: She's a Catawba Indian?

C: Yes. And then I had a cousin of—my mother's oldest niece taught me during first, second, and third years.

W: What was her name?

C: Her name was Ethyl Smith.

W: Do you know how long she taught in Catawba?

C: I'm not sure, but I think she just completed a year of teaching there.

W: What was school like?

C: Well, I think we had two teachers, which was consisted of first, second, and third grade, that was kept in one room. The rest of the children up through the sixth grade, I believe at the time, was in the larger room. We had Elder Hayes that taught school at that time, was the teacher. And I went to school also when Jim Davis taught school.

W: Do you think the kind of education you got in those days was comparable to what the students are getting now?

C: Well, I found out several years ago with some of my older kids that the education I got through the seventh grade they were receiving in the second, third, and fourth grade. Sometimes I'd like to go back to school, but it sort of scares me. I just wonder if I'd ever be able to take all of those—like math and stuff they do today. You just look at it and you put something down. Like in church, I found myself secretary of primary. And when they asked me—let's see, I guess I've been there fourteen years as secretary—that whenever I got through counting on my fingers and toes, I couldn't count anymore, and I wasn't the world's greatest speller, and I couldn't write good. But the counselor that interviewed me at the time said if they didn't think that I was capable of doing it, they wouldn't have asked me to do it in the first place. So, I guess I've gained a lot of education through the church in the past fourteen years as being a secretary to the primary group of the church.

W: We'll talk about your religion in just a minute, but I'm sure that you're aware that many schools throughout the country are producing students who can't read, write, and do math. What do you think of that?

C: I don't know. I've always heard Einstein wasn't the greatest educated either—I mean, didn't have that much of an education—but he turned out to be a pretty successful person. I think you can educate yourself, whether you go to school or not, by reading and keeping up to date with what's going on in the world today. I think that's what's helped me out, except my kids still correct me on a lot of

things I say. They tell me I sound like President Kennedy when—some of the things I say, like "cuber" and things like that—they say I sound like an Easterner.

I think I can better myself by studying books and the things I do right now.

W: When you were young, did you belong to a church?

C: Yes, I have always belonged to a Mormon church.

W: Were you active when you were young?

C: From the time I was five until I was fifteen, I guess, I counted myself active. I always went to church, but I never would get up and give a talk because I was scared of people. People just frightened me. In the last few years, I've been able to get up and talk. In fact, one of my son-in-laws is from Kansas City. I went out to visit them a year ago, Easter, and him and his wife had to have talks at sacrament service. Right in the middle of his talk, or before he started talking, I believe, he says, "My mother-in-law doesn't know it, and she'll probably kill me, but she's gonna get up and bear you her testimony." I remember getting up with tears in my eyes, and it scared me, 'cause looking out at those people, it was really frightening because I'd never stood up in front of that many people. And the chapel was almost jam-packed. I remember, as I started to talking about my belonging to the church and the Indian Tribe and stuff like this, how easy it was for me to continue to talk about the church and the Catawba Indians. And the people listened; even the babies didn't seem to cry. After I got down, I thought, "Gee whiz, how could you get up and talk in front of those people when you can't even talk in front of the people you know in your own ward?" I got to thinking about it: Well, these people in my ward, I would be around all the time. I didn't

want to say things that I couldn't explain. I know what I want to say, but I don't know how to go about saying it once in a while. I thought, "Well these people's never going to see me again anyway, so it doesn't really matter what I say."

[Laughter]

W: Well, that was a good attitude to take. Jewel, when you were small, did you get very many things for Christmas, and what was Christmas like for you and holidays?

C: Well, we got quite a few toys. I mean, it wasn't like what I go out and give my kids today. Sometime I think I give my children too much in the things toward Christmas, instead of really teaching them the spirit of what Christmas is really about. We give 'em material things, and I think sometimes they would enjoy just really sitting down and having Christmas explained to them and why we celebrate Christmas. Because my little one, he does a lot of that now. He wants to know why we celebrate Christ's birthday at that time. He's really an inquisitive little boy when it comes to church matters or anything like that. He likes to really be explained to him.

W: Jewel, do you remember anything about Tribal affairs when you were growing up?

C: I don't remember attending too many of, you know, where they had to make decisions about schools and things like that. I do remember when Uncle Sammy used to put on his exhibition dances. We would go to them, and a lot of times the people from Rock Hill would come down and watch that. I can remember I used to want to get in there and dance with him.

W: Can you do any of the Indian dance?

C: No, not really. I have tried. And I think I taught my kids a little bit about the rain dance. In fact, we have a family that joined the church in St. Louis that we became well acquainted with, and they swear that my kids did an Indian dance the first visit we made to their house. And it rained, and they had a real heavy rain, and they swear to this day that it was because of my kids dancing.

W: Do you remember anything about the appropriation that the Indians got from the state of South Carolina?

C: Well, I don't remember how much money, if that's what you're talking about. What we got was very little. I think it was just enough to buy school supplies and clothes—or just clothes because school supplies was furnished. I don't really remember too much about that.

W: Are you interested in what goes on with the Tribe today?

C: I think so. I'm glad they're doing what they're doing and keeping up with traditions because I think back how the people made pottery to make a living, and a lot of them didn't make a living on that. But I think they should keep up with their making of Indian pottery and the jewelry they made and try and learn some of the language. My husband says, he keeps telling me, he says, "You don't know what you're missing since you don't know how to talk Indian." He says it's such a great heritage I do have, and I should've learned my Indian language to teach our own children. He is German and English, and he says he wished he would have continued to take German and taught his children German because our children can't talk German. And his mother and

grandmother used to talk German in front of us all the time after we went back to Missouri.

W: I don't know how well informed you are about the Tribal affairs, but just, oh I guess it was last month, there was a Tribal meeting held. The Tribe gave the executive committee the power to have lawyers look into the land that was taken away from the Catawbias in the 1700s—in fact, a hundred and forty-four thousand acres of land. And we gave the executive committee the power to delegate to the lawyers to visit the governor, to visit Washington, and to take it through the courts if necessary. Do you know anything about that?

C: No, I've heard just a little bit about it but not a lot. Since I'm not down there, I don't hear too much.

W: Since I've given you this small amount of information, do you think that that's a good idea, or do you have any comment on it?

C: Well, I think we rightfully need what is ours. I don't resent it being took away from us, but maybe in a way I did, too. But since I'm older, I don't resent a lot of things that I probably would have had if I hadn't have married out of the reservation. Like when they gave up the doctor bills and things, and they settled with the Indians, I remember writing a letter to the governor or something of South Carolina, or one of the representatives anyway, and telling my thoughts. The money that they settled up with them was a small amount to give up my birthright, to not be known as a Catawba Indian anymore. I guess when I went to school, a lot of people made me really feel bad about being an Indian. But now that I'm older, and I know the heritage I have, I am proud that I am an Indian. I



teach my children to be just as proud and honor their Indian as they do their White heritage.

W: Jewel, you mentioned this letter. Did you keep a copy, or did you just sit down and write and not keep a copy?

C: I didn't keep a copy. I should have. I remember sending it in, in those words, of giving up my birthright as being known as a Catawba or being recognized as a Catawba Indian anymore. I think years ago, we should've fought for those rights. I think Uncle Sam Blue did a great deal in having people recognize us as Catawba Indians in the things that he did, like going out and talking to people.

W: I think that Gilbert Blue is much like that. He goes out among the people, and he puts on dances, and he does use the few words of the Indian language that he knows.

C: I was just talking to him today, and he was telling me something of this—that he had some appointments for going out and talking and doing his Indian dances. I think this is great because I don't think we should give up our heritage and the traditions that they had. We should try and learn them. Out where I'm at, there's Indian mounds that's been dug up now. And the people is learning more and more about Indian Tribes and their customs from different parts of the country. Every time I read an article about it, I think back, "Well, boy, we should've done something about ours a long time ago and really fought." Maybe we would've had a better education at this time; instead, our younger children getting the education they have now, we older ones could have had the same opportunity if we would've just took it and not been sort of, I think, whipped back.

W: Well, I agree with you on that. I had that same feeling as I started to high school. I was deathly afraid. And then after I got in there, I felt like everybody was going to treat us badly, and they didn't treat us as badly as I thought they were going to—because we didn't cause trouble, but we tried to stand up for ourselves. Quite often, people would give the war whoops, and I can't stand that even this day.

C: One of my greatest problems is—and my husband used to really—when I went to St. Louis and hear somebody say, "Oh, we'll give it back to the Indians." And I'd make the comment, "The Indians didn't act like that, so why should you give it back to us?" [Laughter] We wasn't wild as they pretended we were.

W: Well, that's true. Even though I say even now, the Catawbas don't have the kind of education that we would like to have. I think the biggest portion of them do use good common sense, and it takes that, even if you've got a good education.

C: That's right. My kids was brought up in these public schools, and they hear children talk about—one told my oldest daughter that he wouldn't be an Indian. She said, "Well the only reason you are not is because you didn't have an Indian mama and daddy." [Laughter] She really stood up for her Indian rights, too. And I don't like to see people downgrade anybody. In fact, my older children went to school with a boy from Venezuela, and everybody called him a negro. I told them, "Don't you dare call that kid a negro until you know there's negro in him." I said, "His dark skin don't mean he's negro." I had plenty of opportunities of seeing Indians being called that. In fact, I remember almost choking a girl at high school for saying, "Oh, look at that carload of negroes waving at us." There was

one negro in the car, which was the driver, that was taking the rest of 'em, which was Indians, to work. And I really got upset about it. And this was, I guess, one of the reasons I quit school because I just couldn't take the ridicule they did at that time.

W: Jewel, do you vote?

C: Yes, I vote.

W: Do you think it's important?

C: Why, sure. If I didn't, I don't think—if the people didn't have a right to vote, the country would be in a worse shape than it is now. I think with each one of us voting, we can vote for the person—or that's what I do whenever—I don't declare myself at that time. I know one of the things, you have to declare yourself as a Democrat or Republican. I'm a Democrat, and that's what I've got myself down as because I figured everybody down here is a Democrat. When it comes to election time for the president or the state, I vote for the guy that I think is the best equipped, that can do the job, whether he is a Democrat or Republican. I vote a split ticket.

W: I know, Jewel, that you're in a hurry to go back home, but I also know that you're very proud of your Indian heritage. I also know that you teach your children to be proud also. But before I stop talking to you today, what are you doing down here?

C: Well, I just brought two of my kids back because they wanted to come down and go to school. I think they'll get an opportunity better here than at home. Another thing, they can get to know relatives better and know who their relatives are.

W: All right, would you tell me a little about where they're going to school and how they're going?

C: I can't remember what the school is.

W: York Tech?

C: York Tech, yeah. And they're going in on the Indian Plan, which I—

W: The Catawba Indian.

C: The Catawba Indian Plan that I think is a great opportunity. They can better themselves because they need the education. I think they need more education now than we did when I was kid, or maybe I shouldn't think that way. Maybe I should have thought that I needed the education just as well as my children do, which I know now I do, to help bring them up. I think if I had had a better education, things could be different in my attitude toward people. Since I've been away, I have really—people scared me, but now I can talk just as much as anyone else. I remember when we first went to Illinois, this old lady had just joined the church. She was trying to get me to talk to her one day, and I would always walk out before they said "Amen." And the one Sunday she put her arms right up against the wall, and she says, "You're not leaving until I talk to you." I think before she moved away and went to Montana to live that she wished she'd never had asked me to talk because I talked her ear off. [Laughter]

W: I'm enjoying this conversation, but like I say, I realize you want to get on the road before the storm comes up. I am doing this for the University of Florida, and one day they're going to hand all of these tapes back and give them as a gift to the Catawbans to place in sort of a library on the reservation rather than somewhere

else. Do you have any objections to the University of Florida using these tapes in any way?

C: No, I don't. I think it would be a great thing.

W: I feel, too, that it'll be a great asset to the Catawbas, and I really appreciate the people who will eventually make this possible for us.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Sam Johnson, November 17, 2021

Audit-edited by: Lauren King, March 28, 2022

Final edited by: Evangeline Giaconia, July 29, 2022