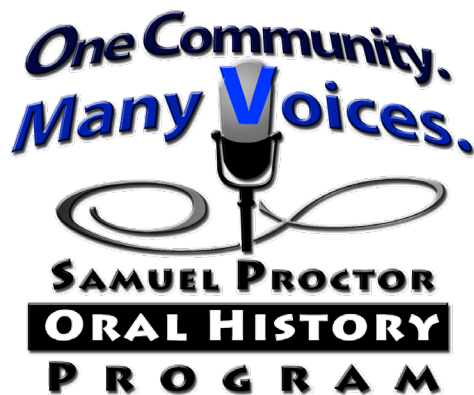


Eric G. Lessmeister

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-159**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
June 2, 1983**



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CAT 159 Eric G. Lessmeister
Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
Interviewed by Emma Reid Echols on June 2, 1983
12 minutes | 6 pages

Abstract: Eric G. Lessmeister is the principal of the Rock Hill High School. Both he and Mrs. Echols were present at the graduation of the 1983 class in which Ginnie Renee Trimnal, a Catawba Indian, became the first honor graduate of the school. In the interview Mr. Lessmeister states that Miss Trimnal is an excellent example of what an ambitious student, with the support of the family, can do while in high school. Mr. Lessmeister, in giving his philosophy of education, states that any student, whether Black, Indian, or White, can accomplish what Trimnal has done.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Ginnie Renee Trimnal; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Education; Speeches]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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CAT 159

Interviewee: Eric G. Lessmeister

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: June 2, 1983

E: This is Emma Reid Echols, Route 6, Box 260, Rock Hill, South Carolina. June 2, 1983. I'm recording the oral history of the Catawba Indians. I'm visiting in the Rock Hill High School—Rock Hill, South Carolina—because I attended their ninety-second Annual Commencement exercises last night at Winthrop College and there, I saw a most unusual sight. I heard strange things because an Indian girl, **Ginnie Renee Trimnal**, was the first honor graduate of the Rock Hill School District—Rock Hill High School. And so, I am visiting with Eric Lessmeister and he will be telling me some of the things he knows about the Indians.

[Break in recording]

E: I was impressed by her speech last night.

L: She did a good job.

E: Very good job. She said she wrote it for the people themselves.

L: She was encouraged by several of the faculty and...

E: Now, do I call you doctor, or—

L: No, Eric. Mr. Lessmeister.

E: [Laughs] But you deserve more than that.

L: Well, I haven't earned more than that.

E: Mr. Lessmeister, I'm sure interested in your program last night for the Rock Hill High School graduates. How many did you have graduated last night? Do you know the number?

L: About 450. I'm not sure of the exact number. 444, 446, there about.

- E: And among those you had seven Indians. They're not recognized really as Catawba Indian students but tell me about the little girl that graduated last night with first honors.
- L: Well, Ginnie Trimnal has been a very contributing member of our student body for years. She's been active in band, active in our yearbook staff, and made some great contributions to student life in general. She's indeed a quality young lady and always has exhibited a great concern for her fellow students and of issues of interest to the student body. She's an overachiever, and she worked very hard and has taken a very challenging group of courses as she's been here. To be perfectly honest with you, I never until recently realized that she had a Catawba Indian ancestry. But, you know, at Rock Hill High School, we are not that concerned with ancestry. We try to deal with the young people as individuals and treat each of them as a unique individual with unique things to offer and their own characteristics. And we have little regard for ancestry of heritage in terms of performance and contribution and our dealings with them.
- E: Did you know that she had any special talents at all? Some Indians have very decided talents for drama and sculpture and painting and especially for pottery making. Did she demonstrate any of those special talents that you know of?
- L: Well, she has been active in the drama program. I know that in terms of performing music, she has been a contributing member of the band as I have earlier indicated, you know. Her excellence has been exhibited more in classroom performance and in band than in other areas. But she has been involved in our dramatic academic competition team and has a talent in those

areas. But now of any pottery making or artistic ability, other than the performing arts, I'm not aware.

E: She moved to Rock Hill only seven years ago. So, she's a relatively new person in Rock Hill School history. So that's another amazing thing that she came to the top so quickly.

L: Well, her academic ability and her desire to excel, and I am sure with parental support at home, which is so vital, have all—these things have all contributed to her performance. You know, if you have the ability and you're guided in the right direction and you get the proper parental push, if you have aspirations to achieve, you can do that. And of course, there is no time limit on that. She had the innate ability, and she made the proper application of her time and efforts.

E: You don't really recognize the other Indian children you have. You really don't know who they are, do you? Except by their names.

L: Name familiarity, sometimes. You know, I've been here twelve years, during which time I have served as a classroom teacher, an assistant principal in charge of discipline, a basketball coach, as well as an assistant principal and a principal. You know, family names I'm very familiar with. But often times, family names are not names that you automatically want to associate with members of the Catawba Tribe. Sometimes you will, sometimes you won't. It may depend on the circumstance of the name recognition.

E: As far as discipline is concerned, a member of a Rock Hill Police Department told me that they seldom ever have a problem with an Indian, as far as crime is

concerned or discipline. What about the children you have here? Do you find any difference in the Indian children that you know of?

L: Well, I cannot cite specifically a difference between an Indian youngster and another minority student and a White student, in terms of discipline. I can recall individual students of the Catawba Tribe who have been discipline problems and whose names stand out in my mind, but I can also think of White and Black youngsters who, as discipline students, stand out in my mind. In terms of positive contribution, again, I can think of White and Black, as well as Indian students who have made contributions. So again, I think in terms of making a distinction between one or the other, it can be done both—in both the positive and the negative sense—but not necessarily by background or by heritage, but just by a family name in a given set of circumstances.

E: You know, she started her speech last night with the words, "Well, we made it." And they did. They have made it a long, long way from the time that the first Indian taught himself to read, with the help of a White lady. And then he organized the first school and they've come a long way all these years. And then for years they were denied opportunity to even ride the school buses or attend the school at Rock Hill. And the first graduate from the Rock Hill High School was Doris Blue **Barber**. Maybe you know this. And now to have this girl be the honor graduate, she—they have come a long way. And what do you think about their future? Now she plans to go on to college—university. And what about others, what do you see as the future of these youngsters?

L: Well, I think the public school educational opportunities are available to all. I think that often times the lack of parental supervision and support may be a factor that does not allow youngsters to maximize their potential. We, as public school educators, cannot do it alone. We can provide opportunities, but we need the support of a home to allow kids to maximize and fully develop their potential. As we view the Catawbas, I think that the Indians, like any other segment of our student population, have all that is available and all the resources the public school educational process to them if they want to take hold of it. If they want to utilize it to its fullest benefit. But again, I think it's going to be dependent upon the parental support and the importance that the family places on the education. If they hold it in little regard, then again, the kid's attitude towards education will not be as positive as a family who places education to be a very valuable quality.

E: I do thank you, and I highly agree with what you say. The future, as she said in her speech last night, depends upon their own attitude towards it and what they're going to make of the future. And I have found a real change in the attitudes of the Indians. I know that Ginnie is very proud of her heritage and her background. And so many of them now do have that pride and that pride is going to help them in the future. I believe, do you think so?

L: I think pride is important to us all as individuals, not necessarily as we talk about a particular ancestry. I think that, you know, self-pride and self-motivation, self-esteem, self-concept, these are the types of things that we hope all youngsters will feel good about, again regardless of their heritage or their background. If they feel good about themselves, they can do whatever they want to do. It's up to their

own individual motivation and aspiration. But Ginnie, she has that pride, but I think it's an individual pride. I would certainly not minimize or underestimate her pride in her Catawba background. But I think she has a great individual pride in herself and her self-dignity. And as a result of this, she has excelled. I think given all of the circumstances being considered equal, all youngsters have this opportunity if they will take advantage of it.

E: I thank you very much on this busy morning, giving me this time to talk with you.

L: My—

[End of interview]

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