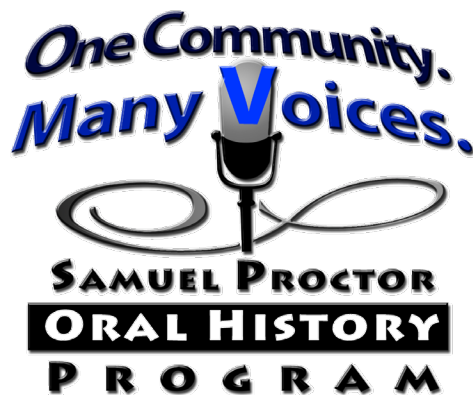


# Robert Alexander Gettys

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)  
CAT-081**

**Interview by:**

**Emma Reid Echols  
October 15, 1973**



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**42 minutes | 19 pages**

**Abstract:** Robert Alexander Gettys, an eighty-two-year-old man, recounts how his family came from Ireland and what led to them to live in Rock Hill, South Carolina. He remembers growing up and spending time fishing and boating with his friends who were Catawbas. He speaks about many different members of the community and expresses his views about the conditions on the reservation as well as the Catawbas themselves. He speaks about places used for hunting and grinding corn in the area and mentions that he collected many tomahawks and arrowheads over the years before he gave them to Dr. Bill Simpson. He ends the interview by remembering some of the government agents that worked in the area.

**Keywords:** [Catawba Nation; Dr. Edward Glenn Hill; Chief Samuel Taylor Blue; John Early Brown; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Indian reservations; Race relations]

**ORAL HISTORY**

**PROGRAM**  
**University of Florida**

CAT 081

Interviewee: Robert Alexander Gettys

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: October 15, 1973

E: This is Emma Reid Echols. Rock Hill, South Carolina, Box 260, Route 6. I'm recording the oral history of the Catawba Indians. This is October 15, 1973. I'm visiting in the home of Mr. Bob Williams—Bob Gettys, excuse me. Mr. Gettys, give us your full name.

G: My what?

E: Your full name.

G: Robert Alexander Gettys.

E: And your address.

G: 1817 Ebenezer Road.

E: And do you mind telling us how old you are?

G: I'm eighty-two.

E: Eighty-two. Well, you have lots of things to tell us. Now, Mr. Gettys's grandparents came from Ireland, and he remembers some of the things that his grandmother told him about the Indians. When your grandmother came to this part of the country from Ireland, tell us where the Indians were living and what you remember.

G: The Indians lived in the Nation, but they lived all around. But they lived mostly down in the Indian reservation. I don't know, really, where they lived. They were supposed to live all about in this section, I reckon. [Laughter] I just don't know. I never did think to ask her because she told me that they had sixteen square miles, and that's what they claimed. I think that South Carolina traded with 'em,

traded 'em out of that and put 'em on the reservation, and gave them so much a year, you know, money a year.

E: Now, what date was the date your grandmother came here?

G: 1823.

E: 1823.

G: And she was four years old when she came here, and she knew a lot about—she remembered everything. [Laughter] She could talk gossip all the time, and my mother wouldn't even pay any attention to her. She'd say, "Mmhm," and Grandma knew all the gossip in the country.

E: The Indians would come and collect the rent from your grandmother?

G: They would come and collect rent from her and from her father. And they lived, at that time, right at the old Simpson place. You know where the Simpson place is? Right behind where we used to live. That was the old Boyd homestead.

Grandfather Boyd, I'll tell you a little about Grandpa Boyd. Grandpa Boyd was quite well to do in Ireland, but he was smothering. And his wife was—well, oh, she was smart as she could be. She was a doctor. She could go everywhere and see the patients. But anyway, he ran a store, ran a big store, and they all sold whiskey in the stores, you know, everybody. But they would get one barrel from the English government, and then they would pour the other in and smuggle the whiskey in from Holland. [Laughter] And so, Grandpa got three barrels in one night. They came off, and somebody from Holland came and rolled 'em up on the beach there, and so Grandpa got three barrels. Grandma says to him, "Now, Thomas, you'd better bury them in the garden tonight." [Laughter] "Oh, no.

Nobody's down on Tom Boyd." And the next morning, the gaugers were there—that is, the government men, you know. Somebody had told on him. And they just sold him out and gave him a ticket to Charleston for his family, and that's all.

E: So that's how they happened to come to Charleston?

G: That's how they came to America. Because they were sold out for selling whiskey—I mean, for smuggling whiskey. They just sold him out and gave him a ticket for his whole family to Charleston. When he got to Charleston, Grandma says, "All right, Thomas. I've been to see the captain"—they came over in the *Caledonia*—"and the captain says he'll give you a dollar a day to dig salt out of the ship." You know, they had ballast of salt. [Laughter] And Grandpa says, "No, sir. That captain won't go back to Ireland and say that he saw Tom Boyd digging salt out of this ship." So, he just took over his family to some friend over there that lived in Charleston, and he took out up there at Winnsboro and got a job as overseer.

E: And then later, they came to Rock Hill.

G: Yeah, they came over to Rock Hill.

E: Now, tell me when the Indians would come to your grandparents' home to collect their rent. Tell us what rent they paid.

G: Well, they paid a side of meat—that's one side—and a gallon of molasses and a peck of meal. That's all they paid. But they had a good many Indians over in the area, and this woman would collect from several, a good many families.

E: Do you know the Indian family that collected from your grandparents?

G: No, I don't remember. She was a nigger woman—I mean an Indian woman. But she was a full-blooded Indian.

E: As a young boy, your father had a farm down near the reservation today, and many times you went fishing and boating with the Indians. Tell us about your experiences that way.

G: Well, Louis Gordon—that was the Indian's name—Louis Gordon and John Brown would take me over to Hugh Nesbitt's. Of course, they'd fish a lot, and they'd fish on the way over there and back, too. Sometimes they'd catch fish, but always a cat or something. You know, the river didn't have as many fish in it as it has now—not near so many, I don't think, because the government stocked this fish. They poured the little old fish in there, and there's lots more on the river now than there were earlier. But at that time, the Indians were living on a reservation, and I think it had some six or seven hundred acres of land. And there all were cabins around in the neighborhood, you know. Louis Gordon lived down next to my father's place. John Brown would come up there lots of times because he was a brother-in-law. And I remember so well that they would take me across to the Nesbitt's' place over there.

E: Did they make their own canoes, their own boats?

G: Yeah, they did. They made 'em. So, old Louis Gordon told me that they had made this canoe, particularly made this canoe. It was made out of plank, though. It wasn't dugout, you know. They'd dig 'em out 'til they'd get it in the lower part in South America. But this other canoe was not. It was made out of plank, the one they took me in.

E: Then you crossed on the ferry. Tell us about the ferries that used to be up and down the river.

G: Well, the ferry was down in the—John Brown and Early, his boy, ran this ferry. They didn't even have a cable above. They just paddled, just poled it. They would take me across over there at the river, and I'd go to Mr.—Dr. Massey had a place over there, and he often would take me to go over there to his place. I remember so well that I'd go. I don't know what I was going on across there for. I must have gone to Riverside because my grandfather—my Grandfather Gettys—came to the river and bought a place down at Riverside. And he came in 1790, my Grandfather Gettys did. He and his wife are buried there in the old Waxhaw cemetery we saw there.

E: Did these Indians ever tell you stories of their past, their myths, or the legends, or stories of their past?

G: No. I never did ask them. They didn't even know it, and frankly, I think that they learned a lot more about the history of the Indians from the White folks.

E: Now, what kind of clothes would they have on at that time?

G: Well, they just wore plain clothes.

E: You are a farmer. Did you see any of them having good farms there? Were any of them good farmers?

G: No, they just worked the little old patches. And they didn't do much. I remember that Mr. Hayes tried to hire Henry—Henry was the older one of this—

E: Cauty?

G: That's it, Canty. You see, he tried to hire him. We had a plan of a little old house burned up on the place when I was a little boy, and then all the neighbors came and helped put it out. But Mr. Hayes tried sold the lumber for the house was burnt. He sold it to my father, and he tried to hire Henry to help haul it. And Henry said he wouldn't work. He just didn't do work. Mr. Hayes, Haskell Hayes, he married a lot of Indians, and his fee was this: He would charge them a dollar for a marriage or a dollar and a half for marriage with a prayer. [Laughter]

E: Marriage with a prayer.

G: With a prayer, yeah. He would give 'em a prayer. See, he was the Indian agent at one time, and he got so much for delivering the money, you know, to the Indians. And he married a lot of 'em, and that's really the charge was. [Laughter] It was fifty cents for the prayer. [Laughter]

E: Okay. With the little bit of fish and the little bit of patches of vegetables that they raised, are you surprised that they had enough to eat, or did they ever have enough to eat?

G: Well, Mr. Hayes said that they just worried him to death. They'd come over and sit around all day and wanting extra money, you know. Well, he'd let 'em have some money, and then he'd try to take it out next time because every month they got the money from the state. He said that they were a shiftless lot, every one of 'em was. [Laughter]

E: Well, now, their women were working making pottery.

G: Now, they started that stuff. Louis's wife did make some pottery and showed it to me.



E: There was a lot—

G: But a lot of them didn't do nothing, didn't even make pottery. And they started that, a lot of it, after the White folks did. A lot of them.

E: Tell me about the doctor down on the reservation. Do you remember Dr. Hill? Tell me about him.

G: [Laughter] Dr. Hill, he was the one that the boys was telling—William was telling you about—that got in a fight. John Brown bit that boy's—somebody bit his—

E: [inaudible 14:34]

G: Yeah. And the next morning, they were in good humor. They decided that Dr. Hill could do everything. They decided to take that ear down, and doctor would sew it back on, and it would be all right. The doctor looked at it and smelled it, and he said, "Unh-uh, that's [inaudible 15:02]" threw it away. [Laughter] Threw it in the wastebasket. He said, "No, no, it's just too bad." The Indians believed in him implicitly. They thought he could do everything. He was a good doctor. But he didn't doctor anybody but poor folks. [Laughter]

E: He traveled with a horse and buggy down into the reservation, right?

G: Well, no, he went by a little old one-horse wagon—in a wagon drawn by a horse. He had a horse, and he always went in that one-horse wagon. And the Indians believed in him implicitly. They kind of believed that he could just come and whenever Dr. Hill came, that would be all right.

E: Would he spend the night on the reservation sometimes?

- G: Oh, yeah. [Laughter] Fess Coleman told me a lot about Dr. Hill. Said Dr. Hill didn't have no bit of fear of nothing. And he would just spend the night, just like you said, at some of the Indian's houses, right along.
- E: But did the White people ever go down to any of the Indian parties?
- G: No. Nobody but Bill Caldwell and Fess Coleman and Dr. Hill would ever go to the Indian parties.
- E: And what did they do at the Indian parties?
- G: Well, I don't know. I guess they twisted the peace pipe together.
- E: Did they ever have any fights along at the end of a party?
- G: Well, they might have had, but Fess didn't tell me that. Fess died. Fess married Rosa Boyd and died at forty. He was one of the oldest on the crowd, you know. He must have bit his brother.
- E: How did Dr. Hill get paid for his services with the Indians?
- G: The state must have paid him a little something because the Indians wouldn't have paid him. The Indians didn't have—at that time, they were a shiftless lot.
- E: Now, you were telling me that one time he went out to collect some—
- G: Oh, 1901, it rained all year. [Laughter] It just poured down, and we didn't make anything. The niggers didn't make anything but rented from us all, or rather, they cropped. Old George Marshall, we owned a place over there right at Lesslie Station, where Ruby Boyd lives now. That place, forty acres. We had that little place; we owned that little place. And I remember that old George Marshall had stayed there that year, and he didn't make anything at all, hardly. He made a deal on eighteen acres of cotton, and he wouldn't pick that—his folks wouldn't

pick it—so we had to go pick it. And we had, of course, a plantation down there along the river. I could tell you more about my—

E: Now, you started to—

G: —young days and the Indians. I went up there with my father—to show you how they paid no attention to blood or anybody that was killed, old Jim Wright was killed there in the house belonged to us, my father. And my father took me up there, and I was so little I must have worn dresses, you know. [Laughter] I think I had on a dress. I think I was three years old—two or three years old. He led me by the hand and took me to that house, and they had moved out—the niggers had moved out in the night because that other nigger was killed there. There was the nigger, Jim Wright, lying there in a pool of blood. And I saw it, I saw him, and my father took me in there and showed me. Now, we paid no attention to murders or something like that, you know, in those days.

E: Let's get back to Dr. Hill. You started to tell me how Dr. Hill collected the—

G: Oh, Dr. Hill went out in the Nation, the reservation. Right on up around the road, went right by—one of my great-aunts lived there, married a Harvey Whiteside. The old Whiteside house was up there on that road, and just above that was my father's place. There was four hundred and twenty-nine acres in all, I think, and it was divided evenly. My father bought this from old man Dick Sturgis, the second place, and the Nation was next to it. Now, the reservation was what we called the Nation, the Indian reservation. The doctor went right up—he was on that road, too. He went up that road in his one-horse wagon, and he attempted to collect, and he didn't. He went along up, and he must have tried to collect from the

Indians because he went on through their Nation, and he came back, and his wife had ran to the porch in front and stopped him, and she said, "How did you come along?" Well, it rained all year, and nobody had anything. He said, "I got promise of three loads of hay. I got six rabbits, and I got enough broom straw to keep you sweeping the balance of your life!" [Laughter]

E: And that was his pay.

G: That was his pay. So, he must have collected from the Indians—tried to collect from the Indians.

E: Do you remember the little black bags the doctor carried with him in that wagon?

G: Huh?

E: Do you remember the little black bags, the doctor's bags, he carried?

G: Oh. He had what they called saddlebags. Yeah, I remember that. He had them on, of course, he carried it along with him.

E: Your father told a story about an Indian by the name of Tims.

G: Alexander Tims. His father would come home on a furlough, and he would regale him with stories about the regiment, you know. He was a member of Company H, South Carolina Volunteers. Oh, hello!

[Break in recording]

G: One of the scouts from Company H, Twelfth Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers. And they were made up at Rock Hill. A lot of those—you named a lot of the Harrises and so forth—they were Indians, all of those were Indians. But there wasn't Alexander Tims. And the way he, the captain, got that Alexander Tims, he says, "Let me have that fellow because he's a scout." He would slip

over there, and he could hear the Yankees talking. He could go over there, and no one would ever see him. And they would come back with the plans, you know, and he'd tell the captain. Well, the captain found that he was good at that, and he said one day the Indian told him, says, "I can steal a horse." And he says, "You can't. You're gonna fool around and get shot, and then I won't have a scout." "Oh, I'm not gonna get shot." And Alexander Tims, then, went back. He did go on some dark night, and he was going to get his horse. He said that he waited 'til the sentry turned around and walked off, going back towards the tents. He grabbed a horse, got a hold of him, and said that somebody ran out of a tent and hollered, "Look out there! Somebody's taking the horse!" He says, "I started out. He shot at me, but he missed me, and I just kept going and kept going." He came on over around the camp, you know, the Confederate camp. They bought his horse, and he was mad about it. He was mad because he didn't get a saddle! The captain said, "Oh, you did bring your horse with you." He got the horse, so he gave him his five dollars. He didn't think a thing of that five dollars, but he was worrying himself because he didn't get the saddle.

E: Do you know what ever happened to him after that?

G: No, I don't know what happened to him. I think he came back alive.

E: Yes, he did.

G: I don't think he was killed.

E: Did you know any of the widows who got pensions from the government through that?

G: No, I didn't know any of 'em, but they must have gotten little pensions.

E: Some of 'em I'm sure did. What ones of the older Indians do you remember? You mentioned Early Brown, and you mentioned John Brown.

G: Well, I knew old Billy George. They called him Billy. Now, I think he was a full-blooded Indian, but Louis Gordon wasn't, nor was John Brown full-blooded, I don't think. Early Brown wasn't either, I don't think. No, Early, of course, he wasn't. He was John's son.

E: What about Chief Blue? What do you remember about him?

G: Who?

E: Chief Blue. Chief Sam Blue.

G: Well, I knew him, but he's like I told you about. He got a lot of his information about the Indians from the White people. Yeah, I remember him. Chief Blue had been living—in the last ten or fifteen years that he was living. But I knew him quite well.

E: Have you ever attended a service in the Mormon church?

G: No, but I've been there, and I've seen their church. I knew some of the members, the White members. They had White members, too, in that church.

E: What do you remember about the first church that was there? It was a Presbyterian church there. Do you remember the plank frame house that was that Presbyterian church?

G: I heard that Mrs. Dunlap told about that, but I don't remember anything at all about it, except that she said that the Indians had a church down there. Old Mrs. Dunlap, she was sort of a contemporary, I reckon, of my grandmother's. And I just do remember that she said that the Presbyterians had a church down there.

- E: Now, do you remember any of the teachers that were down there? Mr. Seth Massey taught there, and Mr.—
- G: I think Sam Lesslie taught there.
- E: Mr. Sam Lesslie taught there. Do you remember any of the teachers that taught there?
- G: No, that was the only one that I remember. Mrs. Dunlap, I believe, was a teacher down there. Yeah, I think.
- E: What about sports? Did you ever play ball with any of the Indians?
- G: No, I didn't play ball with the Indians.
- E: Later on, I think they had a ball team that they—
- G: Yeah.
- E: —played with. Now, in recent years—you've told me of the past, but in recent years, what do you think about the conditions on the reservation now? The conditions and the jobs for the Indians?
- G: Well, they've got jobs, and the ones that—there's one Indian that's a mighty good friend of mine. I took the agricultural census, and when I ran across him—he was about half-White—I said, "Do you have any chickens?" [Laughter] I had to take down anybody that had a hundred chickens, I think. And he said, "No," he didn't think so. [Laughter] He said, "There's an old hen scattered and stole her nest, and I think that she's got the flock of little chickens." I said, "Well, we'll walk out there and see." And I'll bet you there was a hundred chickens out there in the woods, you know. I said, "All right, are you willing to take a hundred?" He said, "Yes." [Laughter]

E: Now, you were taking census when? What was the year?

G: That was 1964. He always knows me now. What's that nigger's, Indian's name? I can't think of it. He lives right next to the PEC building, you know. Right over there just a little ways from that.

[Break in recording]

E: Do you know any of them that went off to school? Do you know any of them that ever went to Carlisle School?

G: No. Wheelock didn't belong there; he didn't come down.

E: He was Oneida Indian?

G: Yeah, he's a—I don't know any of 'em that went to Carlisle.

E: Theodore Harris, do you remember him?

G: Yeah, I remember him. I remember Theodore Harris, yeah.

E: And Ben Harris. Do you remember Ben?

G: I don't know that I do. I remember old man Billy. I think he was the older one, I think maybe it's his father.

E: Now, what did Billy Harris look like? He was an old man when you knew him, wasn't he?

G: Yeah, he was an old man when I knew him. And I'm eighty-two, so I'm old.

E: But he was small in frame, wasn't he?

G: Yeah, he was a little old fella.

E: And Louis Gordon. What did he look like?



G: Louis Gordon? He was about half-White. He lived right next to—there was one place between us and that Indian Nation, and I think Mr. Ed Walker owned it. Little old place, forty or fifty acres—thirty, probably.

E: If you were going to have some adjectives to describe these Indians, whether they were honest or trustworthy or dependable or good friends, how would you describe the Indians as a whole as you knew them?

G: Well, when I first knew them, they were a shiftless lot. [Laughter] They were trifling. They didn't do anything then but lie around the store. And most of the women just walked the roads. I think that now, you know, they must have been in pretty good shape. Mr. Hyde and Mr. Pratt, somebody built them a monument over there at Fort Mill, and they must have been pretty good when they pushed 'em way back on there. They must have been pretty good, but when I knew them, they were not. They were shiftless.

E: Mr. Gettys, talking about the old times, down in the woods not too far from Neely's Creek Church is this great big mortar where they used to grind their corn.

G: Yeah.

E: You saw that as a young boy, and it's still there. How do you remember them using that?

G: Well, they ground their corn. They tied the pestle, what they called a pestle, to a limb of a tree. It was under a tree. And they could just pull it down and grind the corn, and I think they wet that corn. They probably boiled it a little bit. Then they pulled that pestle down and ground it up. Then they'd let it loose, and it'd go on up in the tree, you know.

E: There's a spring close by there, that Rock Spring close by that place, isn't it?

G: Yeah.

E: That's the only one that I know of. Have you ever seen another one anywhere over the Nation, a big one like that?

G: No, I haven't. I remember now that there was a deer lick down on our place where the Indians and others would shoot deer. I figured that everybody had a deer lick, but there's only two or three in South Carolina, I understand. And this was a place about as wide, as big as this room or bigger, that the deers had come and pawed up the dirt up in a regular mound. Oh, it was just a complete circle. When my grandmother said that Mr. Joshua Sturgis, way back yonder, he would come down there and hunt, and he would stay at their house. That was in 1820 or [18]30, right along there. He said that he had killed three deer right there in that deer lick.

E: That deer lick was used by the Indians, too?

G: Oh, yeah. The Indians would come there and shoot deer.

E: Did you ever pick up any arrowheads or tomahawks or anything like that?

G: I have picked up a whole lot of 'em, and I gave them all, just like I told you, to Dr. Simpson. Dr. Simpson got so enthusiastic. He talked to me—you know, he worked on my mouth—and he was telling me about all his arrowheads that he had. And I said, "I've got a whole lot, and I'll give 'em to you." I understand that he finally gave 'em to the—Bill has them, but I thought he had given 'em to the library.

E: They're anxious sometime to have a museum. They don't have it yet, but they're anxious to have a museum, place some of those things.

G: Bill Simpson has them at his house now, so I understand. And I told you about that rock that they said came as a meteor. Everybody, all the niggers, though, called it a thunderbolt. And I had that too, but I gave it all to Dr. Simpson.

E: Whereabouts on the reservation would you find most of these arrowheads? Any certain places you'd find them?

G: Yeah, no. You'd find them where they had made 'em, yeah, lots of times. And then all around the old plantations, everywhere. We found a lot of them around home because that was part of the Indian Nation, Indian reservation then. The Indians hunted all abouts in there.

E: Did you ever go hunting with them?

G: No, I never did.

E: Some of them were very good hunters, I believe.

G: Yeah, I understand they was. I fished with them, but I never did go hunting with them.

E: Did you know the Indians who helped to build, do any carpentry work? Who were the good carpenters among the Nation?

G: Well, when I was growing up, they didn't do nothing. [Laughter] They didn't do nothing, but I understand that some of them are now are carpenters.

E: Well, John Idle Sanders was a carpenter, and his father was a carpenter. They lived not far from Lesslie and did some there.

G: Yeah. The government again took the Indians and bought 'em a plantation, bought 'em a great big farm. That's the old Childs place, and they give it to the Indians. And the Indians then sold it; I think they sold it. Maybe they divided it up. Anyway, they're scattered all about over the country now.

E: Do you remember Richard Harris?

G: Richard Harris? I don't know that he is in there. I don't remember any Richard particular.

E: He was in the World War. I didn't know whether you remembered. He was one of those that went to France.

G: In the Second World War.

E: Yes.

G: The only thing I remember is the First World War.

E: Mr. Gettys, what Indian agents do you remember?

G: Well, I don't remember any but Jake Hayes and D. T. Leslie and—

E: Mr. Flowers, you remember him?

G: Who?

E: Flowers.

G: Yeah, Flowers and Boyd. Mr. Tom Boyd, cousin Tom Boyd. I remember those four, 'bout the only ones I remember. But I remember mostly Mr. Hayes because he had it several years, and he ran a store. He was Mr. Billy Hayes's son, but he is first cousin to Mr. **Nace** Williamson, the old owner, you know.

E: Running a store and then giving them their money, he would come in contact with the Indians.

G: Yeah. He said they would lay around in his store all the time.

[End of interview]

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