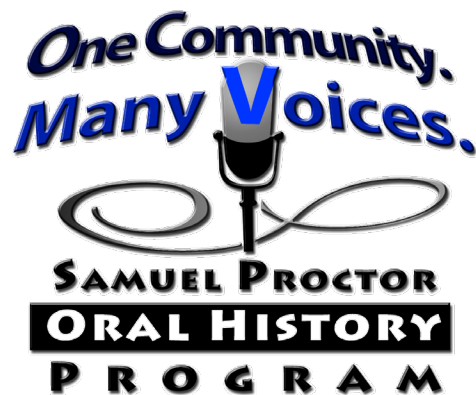


# Earl Robbins

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)  
CAT-175**

**Interview by:**

**Emma Reid Echols  
September 22, 1992**



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**CAT 175 Earl Robbins**  
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**  
**Interviewed by Emma Reid Echols on September 22, 1992**  
**17 minutes | 15 pages**

**Abstract:** Earl Robbins discusses his experience in pottery making. He speaks about the firing drum that his son made for him and shows a variety of his pieces. He highlights boats, pipe molds, wedding jugs, bowls, and vases. He explains how he uses the drum for both bigger and smaller pieces. He gives estimates for the prices of different pieces and shares that he has sold his pottery to three different museums.

**Keywords:** [Catawba Nation; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Pottery]

**SAMUEL PROCTOR**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
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CAT 175

Interviewee: Earl Robbins

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

Date of Interview: September 22, 1992

E: This is Emma Echols in Charlotte, North Carolina, 5150 Sharon Road. I am working on the oral history of the Catawba Indians with the University of Florida—Dr. Samuel Proctor. I am down on the Indian reservation, and I have heard of this place before, because on the reservation I have heard them say, “If you see the smoke coming off of the trees down there near the river, it’s Earl Robbins. He’s firing his pottery today.” So here I am sitting on the porch of Earl Robbins’s home, talking with him, and I know he’ll have some interesting things to tell me. Earl, tell me your full name.

R: Earl Robbins.

E: And who was your mother and father?

R: Frank Robbins and Effie Harris Robbins.

E: Do you remember who your grandparents were?

R: I don’t remember one. I remember Ed Harris.

E: Now, who did you marry?

R: Viola Harris.

E: How many children do you have?

R: Four.

E: You had five, and one died, I believe?

R: That’s right, we did.

E: You’re in the pottery business. What about your children? Do any of them make pottery?

R: Not yet they don’t. They’re all working.

E: But your son has helped you build a big drum to fire in?

R: Oh, yes, ma'am. He built that for me.

E: Now, where do your children work?

R: Well, one of 'em works down here at Newport Steel—the one that built this drum. And another works for [inaudible 1:41] up here—Frank. And then Barney, he just works up there at the shop that he goes to at Springdale. Let's see, Margaret—I don't know where she works at now, my daughter.

E: But they all have good jobs. And you worked where until you retired?

R: I worked for a carpenter. I worked building cabinets. I used to work for J.C. Greene, E.B. Rogers, and Steve Percival. There's three of 'em that built and contracted, and I went around to all of the houses, building the cabinets for 'em.

E: Oh, right. And then you and George McKinney worked together?

R: We worked together a long time, too, me and George McKinney. We worked for Bruce Blackland back then.

E: How old are you now?

R: Seventy.

E: When did you retire?

R: Well, it's been a good while.

E: When did you start making this pottery?

R: Let's see, I made some as we moved down here. We moved down here in 1935. We lived up there at Chesnee. In 1935, we moved down here, so I guess about a year or two after that, I was making pottery. I was thirteen when we moved down here. And then I quit off when I got married, and then I started back in about

[19]86, I reckon. But I couldn't make nothing a long time ago, just little old things.

[Laughter]

E: When did you start making these great big ones? After your son built you this?

R: Yes, ma'am. I had to have that built to burn them in. They're so big, I couldn't get 'em in the oven.

E: Where do you get your clay? And you mix your own clay together?

R: Mix it. I used to get it over at Mr. Nesbit's, but he don't let nobody get no more over there.

E: You mix different kinds of clay together?

R: Yes, ma'am, two kinds.

E: And you make your pottery in the early morning or at nighttime?

R: I make it in the early morning when I get up. I get up around two o'clock.

E: Now, how long would it take you to make one of those great big pots?

R: Well, that [inaudible 3:46], you've got to wait on it in so many different stages, you know. It dries up a little before you add on. I couldn't tell you how long it takes me.

E: So, you'd say you build a pottery, don't you?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Bit by bit. Now, how do you sell it? Do people come here to find it?

R: Yes, ma'am, they come here.

E: You don't have to advertise it?

R: I haven't yet.

E: Your cheapest pot is how much? And your biggest pot is how much?

R: Well, I have some for ten dollars, and I've got one or two out there for five hundred dollars.

E: Do the museums buy from you?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: What museums have you sold to?

R: In Columbia, and out here at York County, and then Gastonia.

E: Three museums?

R: Mmhm.

E: Well, not only do you make some money out of it, but it's a real joy to do. You're creating something, aren't you?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: And yours is different. What do you use to make those little feather designs on it? It looks like little ferns or leaves on some of yours.

R: I've got me a little thing I made that I run over them and make it on there.

E: Have you ever seen anybody else have a horse like you have?

R: No, ma'am.

E: You create your own designs which you want to make.

R: Yes, ma'am. Well, Mr. Bloomer, he said there was somebody who made a horse pot long years ago, somewhere or another. He just drew a picture of a horse on paper and started making a little old horse pot.

E: So then, that's the first one that you've made?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: You haven't sold that horse yet?

R: Well, I've sold a lot of horse pots since then.

E: Oh, you have?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: I saw the one out in your—

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Now, how many big pots do you put in your draw method of firing?

R: I can get three in there.

E: Just three?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: And then how long does it take to fire them?

R: Well, it takes me from early that morning 'til about 3:00 that evening to get 'em heated and burnt, too.

E: And you start them in there cold and then gradually heat it up?

R: That's right—just bring it up slowly.

E: You never know what colors they're gonna be, do you?

R: No, ma'am, I don't know.

E: Do you have you sometimes a big thing broken, and you almost can cry when you see that broken one?

R: They break, but I just say, "I'll make another one."

E: Do you know of any other men that are making them? You're the only one that I know down—

R: Well now, there are some more, I think, who are making them now—some of the young ones.

E: Evelyn George makes them, and I saw over at her place a beautiful boat that you gave her daughter. It was solid black and beautifully shaped.

R: Yes, ma'am.

[Break in recording]

E: Your home here is on a part of the old reservation. Tell me how you happened to get this little piece and what you did to this. You have your house here, but you don't have a title to this land, do you?

R: No, ma'am. I come down here one day, and I thought I'd build down here at the reservation again. I come down this old road here—all the way to the end—and built me a house. After that, everybody built up the road above us.

E: How many rooms do you have in your house?

R: Well, I had three then.

E: And you have electricity? And your own well?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Since you can make and do things, you had that all fixed up, didn't you?

R: Yes, ma'am. I had me a telephone down here, too.

E: Yes, I called you.

R: Oh, yeah, I thought it went well.

E: I was so glad. You're surrounded down here with such beautiful—and that beautiful yellow truck out there—you told me something interesting about how you managed to buy that truck at all; you financed it. You've never borrowed money?

R: Well, long years ago, when I had a family, I did borrow a little bit now and then.



E: But you live on your social security retirement?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: And you pay cash for everything.

R: Yes, ma'am. Well, if I don't have it, I don't buy it. [Laughter]

E: That's a very good philosophy, isn't it? Do you go to church on the reservation?

R: No, ma'am, I don't go to church now.

E: Well, you will get started one of these days, I'm sure.

[Break in recording]

E: Now we are out in the room where he displays his pottery. He'll have to tell you about some of them. There's a great huge one over here that is marked "sold," but he tells me there's a slight crack in it. And then this beautiful one here—how much will it sell for? Will it still go to a museum?

R: Well, I don't know about how much I would get for those, for I haven't sold none that size yet, exactly like them anyway.

E: And your horses—you have a ready sale for them? Do lots of people like your horses?

R: Well, they've sold, a good many of them.

E: Your horses range in price from—?

R: Well, the cracked ones are cheaper. The good ones are seventy-five dollars.

E: Seventy-five dollars. And **with** a crack, it's about forty, isn't it?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Did anybody show you how to make the ones that you have with the snake wrapped around it?

R: No, ma'am.

E: You just learned to do it yourself?

R: I just learned it myself.

E: Now, what kind of snake is that?

R: Oh, somebody else asked me that one day, but I don't know what kind of snake it is. [Laughter] I don't know what I'd call it.

E: The design that you have on there is a copperhead. Doris Blue used to make two kinds: a copperhead and then she'd make a water moccasin, and that's different, but these checkers that you've got is a sign of that. Do you have any that you have a pattern to use to make from?

R: No, ma'am, no pattern for these snake bowls.

E: What about the molds over here?

R: Yes, for the pipes, I have made me a mold.

E: What about your pipe molds? What do you like of those? Tell me about 'em.

R: Let's see, this here—this is the way it was, making this here arrowhead pipe. And then one day I thought of trying to put a face on it, and that's what I did. It came up with a face on it.

E: That's beautiful. How many different kinds of these pipe molds do you have? Here you've got an axe on it.

R: Yes, ma'am, an axe and a "chicken comb," they call it. I just made a horse head here. This here is the face pipe.

E: A face on it.

R: And that's just a plain pipe there.

E: Now, those you molded—you didn't have a pattern to go by?

R: Not when I started, I didn't. I had to make me some. And when I started making the first one, I made me some molds.

E: Do you like to make the wedding one? I see you have one there.

R: This here belongs to her.

E: Oh, that's hers. [Laughter] And she likes to make those. They're beautiful.

R: I had some here, but I done sold all my wedding jugs, haven't I?

E: Yes, you have. The vases are tall and shaped beautifully. What do you use to put your design on with?

R: The design on the—?

E: The little feather designs.

R: I've got me a little wheel that I made kind of crooked, and I just rolled it like that, and it leaves it on there.

E: You make big boats—bigger than any I've seen. Doris Blue used to make the small ones.

R: She did.

E: Yes. But you like to make the big ones?

R: Well, I make a few of 'em and mix 'em up. We've got some here that are smaller. This one here is not as big as that one there.

E: Now, in your big drum outside where you do the firing, I saw the wood that your son has for you. How many of those pots do you put in that big drum?

R: Well, these here, you can put a bunch of 'em in there. I haven't burnt none of this size in that big drum.

E: And you carefully put them in, and then start your fire?

R: Yeah, and I let 'em heat slowly 'til they get good and hot, and then I put my wood on the top.

E: It takes you several hours to do that?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Well, Viola showed it to me the other day.

R: Oh, did she?

E: Yes, and you have got a big stack of wood out there ready, too. Let's walk out there and see it.

R: Alright.

[Break in recording]

R: We got two of 'em.

E: Now, he's opened the door to this great big drum where he fires his pottery. He has a grate he puts down below and then carefully arranges his pottery in there. You don't want them to break. And you start the fire slowly?

R: Yes, ma'am. I start it over on the other side.

E: And then gradually you put more and more chips and more and more wood?

R: Yes, until it gets hotter and hotter and hotter.

E: What kind of wood do you do?

R: I use any kind on mine.

E: Any kind?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: You keep on opening the door and adding more fuel, more wood, and then three or four hours later, you come back out, and you let it get cool completely before you take them out?

R: Pretty cool, yes, ma'am.

E: If the air gets to them, they tend to crack, don't they?

R: Well, they say it does. They might do it some, you know.

E: You not only have this drum out here for yourself, but you have a smaller one over there for your wife. And back behind you have a garden. You are adding onto your house another porch. You have to have a lot of years to do all the things that you started, you know that?

R: Yes, ma'am. I should've done had that built a long time ago.

E: But now you can sit out there and watch the sun go down across the river and think about the times you and the boys used to play up and down that river.

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: I've never seen a great big one like this before to fire these big pots. Do you know of any others that make 'em like you do?

R: They don't have a furnace like this. I think this is the only furnace that's made like it.

E: You couldn't have it unless your son made it?

R: No, ma'am.

E: Well, we're awfully glad that you know how you make this pottery, and you'll show other people the beautiful things you have made—hand it on down to the next generation.

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: You are sort of proud to be an Indian?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: Everybody is.

R: Yes, ma'am.

[Break in recording]

E: I didn't believe it, but Earl has taken me in another building to show me some more pots, and here are great big ones. There are three pots here that he put in that firing furnace. One has horses on either end and then an Indian on the other. So, there are four figures around that one, and the other ones are the same thing. There are three of them. Earl, what will sell them for, you think?

R: I hope I'll get five hundred dollars for these, this big one.

E: They're beautiful. And what about these others back over here that are great big ones, too?

R: Yes, ma'am. That's 450, I think, for that. I believe it is.

E: 450. And will a museum probably buy that one?

R: Sometimes they do, they'll buy one of 'em.

E: Now, these—you call them "gypsy pots" when they have the feet on the bottom of them?

R: I don't know what they call them kind of pots.

E: I've never seen the gypsy pot with those figures on it—the molded Indian on it.

R: Well, see, I started putting these on when I started back making pots. I started making them like that, the head doing like that.

E: And you saw your mother making these?

R: No, ma'am. She never did make no heads like this. She never did make no large ones, either.

E: Well, these are the largest ones I have ever seen. Now, these great big ones, you'll probably get two in at a time. You've got three of these small ones.

R: Yes, ma'am. Now, here are the vases I made. You've got a big batch here.

E: All of these have that same little decoration. It looks like a little fern, or it looks like a little tree. But he has got that on all of his ones. The wedding vases, do you have any certain—?

R: Bowls.

E: Bowls. Then the peace pipes.

R: Wall pockets.

E: Yes. Now, that's a new one. I haven't seen it made down here before. And then you have over here on the table a whole bunch of little knives.

R: I make my own knives, too.

E: I see. You make your own knives to use for scraping?

R: Yes, ma'am. I use bones to scrape and make those. I saw the bones out. These bones like this? I saw 'em out and make 'em.

E: That's just an animal bone? And you use it to scrape? So many people have their mother's rubbing stone, but you don't have any of those.

R: I have to rub 'em with that bone.

E: I don't think I'll ever be down here at two o'clock in the morning when you start making them, but it's amazing. How many different kinds do you suppose you've made?

R: Oh, I couldn't tell you. I wouldn't have no idea. This here's a pipe mold I made for Mr. Bloomer—Tom Bloomer? It's a tea kettle pipe mold. He found one somewhere or another and wanted me to make him a mold for it.

E: He's the one who told you to make the horse?

R: Yes, ma'am.

E: And he drew a picture of it to show you?

R: Yes, ma'am. He drew the designs on that there peace pipe, too. I'm making that for him.

E: Now, that will go in a museum in Washington probably, won't it?

R: I don't know where he'll put it. He wanted one without legs and one with the legs.

E: Well, you've got a variety—and beautiful things all around.

R: Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

[End of interview]

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