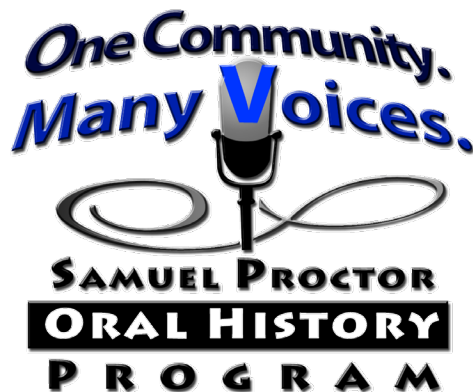


Lavinia Alberta Canty Ferrell

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
CAT-187**

Interview by:

**Emma Reid Echols
November 17, 1992**



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22 minutes | 12 pages

Abstract: Alberta Ferrell recalls her early years when she learned to make pottery with her mother, and describes how she has taught her children and grandchildren how to make it as well. She remembers her childhood on the reservation and shares memories of her mother finding medicines in the forests. She tells a story about an error on her birth certificate. She speaks about her children, including her son, Kevin, who died when he was twenty-five years old. She expresses gratitude for the friends who comforted her after her son passed away. She shares words that her son wrote in his diary before he died.

Keywords: [Catawba Nation; Kevin Ferrell; South Carolina--Rock Hill; Religion; Oral biography]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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CAT 187

Interviewee: Lavinia Alberta Canty Ferrell

Interviewer: Emma Reid Echols

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E: I saw him when he picked out piece by piece, and Alberta joined us, and it's most interesting to see that all the pieces are now inside, and I'm sitting here looking at beautiful pottery, some of 'em broken. I almost cried when I saw one of the pretty ones broken. I'll let Alberta tell you your full name and your address.

F: Lavinia Alberta Ferrell. Lavinia Alberta Canty Ferrell. 1466 Mount Gallant Road.

E: How long have you been firing pottery? Since you were a little girl? Your mother made it, and then you learned from her?

F: Yes, and we used to have to help gather together the wood to burn, fire my mama's pots.

E: Did she fire hers in the fireplace or outside?

F: Daddy dug a hole in the ground, where she fired 'em outside, then in the fireplace.

E: Not only you making it now, but your children are also making it. Tell me who's making it in your family. Marsha's making it, and who else?

F: Marsha and her daughter, Cassandra. My Denise and her son, Anthony Nichols. All of my grandchildren have learned how to make pottery.

E: All of your grandchildren are learning now to do the same thing?

F: I hope so.

E: And you would not be able to do it if it wasn't for that wonderful husband of yours who fires it. Tell me about—how did you meet that husband? And where did you live after you married him?

F: I lived in Rhode Island. He was stationed in Charlestown, in the Navy. I don't know what I'd do without him.

E: He was in the Navy, World War II. He traveled all over the world, and then you've come back here to live in Rock Hill with all your people around about you.

F: Yes.

E: What was it like, as you grew up, as a little girl on the reservation, where you didn't have any water? You got your water from a spring, I'm sure, or a well—

F: And that was delicious water from a spring, cold as it could be. We kept the springs clean. We kept a little dipper hanging on the tree limb at the spring, where we could get a drink of water there any time. It was around where the springs were at.

E: Did you have a garden, or were there too many trees around to have a garden down there?

F: No, we had gardens.

E: Had a garden. And you had fruit trees, and you got fruits from the forests, I'm sure.

F: We had delicious fruit from the forest that our Heavenly Father provided for poor folks that didn't have money to go to the store and buy no candy. We had gooseberries. They were delicious. I wished I had some gooseberries right now. We had locusts. We had persimmons. We had all kinds of good food out of the forests.

E: What about medicines? Did your mother get medicines from the forests to treat you when you had a burn or a cut?

F: Yes. I remember walking in the woods with Mama, and she'd be hunting alder tag. That was mostly—catnip and alder tag, boiled and mixed together for little [inaudible 4:25] babies that had colic. Other than that, I remember Mama looking for what she called fire weed. That was if you had kidney problems, and she had kidney problems all the time.

E: You would boil that and then drink it?

F: Yes.

E: And what other kind of medicines were there?

F: You can grow catnip right in your yard. We'd get catnip and mix it with alder tag. I used to sit down and fix that up for my babies, fix myself a cup and set there and drink a cup of this tea while I was feeding my babies.

E: That would relax—

F: Relax 'em. If they had the colic, it would help this.

E: All your babies were delivered, most of the time, on the reservation by a midwife, were they not?

F: No, not mine.

E: Where were your children born, in the hospital?

F: Yes. Marsha was born—Old York General.

E: You had a problem getting the birth certificate. Tell me about that.

F: 'Cause I was delivered by a midwife, a Black midwife, and the woman down at the [inaudible 5:54] statistics in Columbia said this woman would deliver lot of babies and wait 'til she went home to write down their sex and their names and everything. And she wrote down that I was a big boy. Mama said I was big. She

said I weighed about fifteen pounds, so I reckon maybe I did look like a big old boy. Anyway, on my birth certificate, it was that I was a male, and I had a time getting this straightened out. Even the paper where I worked at the time when I found my birth certificate—Betty and Bobby Blue had my birth certificate, and I didn't know where it was at, 'cause they had been out at Aunt Isabelle's looking through my mama's stuff. So that's how they come had my birth certificate.

E: They should've given it to you.

F: Yeah, but they didn't. They laughed about it a while 'til it they go all around the place that they had my birth certificate and that it had on it that I was a male.

Okay. I went down to Columbia, me and my sister Joyce and Geneva, to get our birth certificates straightened out. And the way I got mine—Samuel Beck was always a clerk with the Indians and in church. He knew everything, how to do all kinds of things. I needed him now so he could help me get my retirement that I couldn't even get where I worked twenty-two-and-a-half years. I'd not been able to get any, not a penny of it. And they owe me five weeks' vacation pay. I ain't got any of that either yet. And I need my money as well as anybody. I'm not healthy.

E: Now, did you get your birth certificate finally? When?

F: Yes.

E: I believe Samuel Beck helped you, did he not?

F: Yes, he did. He had the bishop, Kenneth Harris, to fix me up papers and my church record, and I took that with me. People at work had fixed out a letter, also,

of when I would have my physical before when I went to work there, that I was female. But Samuel Beck did it—by the records he set from the church.

E: Then after you got your birth certificate, even so, you have not been able to get your retirement or social security since then. Is that right?

F: My retirement from work.

E: Where were you working at this time?

F: E.C. Manufacturing in Pinesborough, North Carolina.

E: Well, I'm sure a congressman, or a lawyer, or somebody's gonna be able to help you get that straightened out. I hope so.

F: John Trance supposed to be helping me. If he don't get on the ball, the election's coming up next week. There's about three hundred of us involved in this, so there goes three hundred votes if he don't help none of us.

E: Well, he has been most interested in you all along for years, and I hope he'll be able to help you now.

F: I hope he will be, too. I always had heard that they couldn't keep your retirement money, but that's not right. They've still got mine, and I retired almost two years ago, August 30, 1991, at age sixty-two. I'm sixty-three now and still ain't got none of it.

E: I hope that's gonna be straightened out. Now, of your children, are all of them living? Tell me where they are...or what they're doing. Let's start with Marsha. The youngest little children came to school, to me, at Northside in third grade. At that time, she was writing words of the Catawba language, and she was speaking a little bit of it. Later on, I saw her and this whole family walk across the

stage at Winthrop, singing a song in the Catawba language, and Alberta is going to put that on a tape for me a little bit later. So now, we're gonna talk about her children. Let's see, the oldest one was—

F: Marsha.

E: All right. And she's at York County Hospital working there now. Tell me the other children.

F: Denise Nichols. She's making pottery also. She lives on the reservation. Norma Harris. She lives on the reservation but right beside Denise. Kevin Lamar was the only son that I had, and he's gone. He used to help me get my clay and my wood, help me do all the burning—what his daddy helps me do now, thank goodness.

E: Did he ever try to make any pottery himself?

F: Kevin? He could make it, but he thought that was woman's work.

E: Then I believe Kevin was married, and we won't go into all of that, but we're just sorry that Kevin is not here today, because the pottery that she has over here on the table is clay that Kevin brought to her many years ago.

F: 1975, he dug this clay.

E: [19]75. That was a long time ago. When Kevin died—I do want to say this—he was highly respected by the law enforcement officers of York County. Their whole group attended his funeral in a body, and they speak very highly of Kevin. It's most unusual that Kevin went away by his own hand, which is not usual. It must have been a great burden on his heart to do that. But Alberta tells me that she got comfort from the friends who came and comfort from the service that was

held in the Mormon church, but also, she had comfort from the presence of Kevin that God sent back to her one day. Tell me, you said Kevin came back, and he talked to you. What did he talk to you about?

F: All the things that had happened to him.

E: Did he tell you about roaming up and down the Catawba River and fishing and hunting? Tell you about his school days or things of that kind?

F: Kevin liked to go hunting—bird hunting and what-have-you hunting.

E: And this vision—he talked to you, and patted your hand, and stayed with you, and talked to you about the old times a long time, didn't he?

F: Kevin come back and visit me on October 21, 1982.

E: He was twenty-five years old when he died.

F: Yes. When he came back to visit me in October 21, 1982, it wasn't no dream 'cause I hadn't been asleep, but I was in my bedroom. I was in my bed, and he came to visit with me. He looked so good. He looked so handsome, his skin was so pretty. He looked so pretty. Anyway, he told me that me and his daddy was not to worry about what happened to him, that it didn't happen the way that we were told. That he was gone, and we was not to worry about it. We was not to worry that we didn't get to see him, that they wouldn't let us see him.

E: But you saw him when he came back to see you, didn't you?

F: Yes.

E: That was better.

F: He told me he was glad I didn't get to see him after he died because he told me how he looked.

E: Well, you know there's a verse in the Bible that says, "As one whom his mother comforted, so will I comfort you." So Heavenly God sent Kevin back to you to bring you the comfort that you needed. And I'm glad you told me that story. Also, you said when you went to see Sammy Beck, who was very ill, that Sammy told you that he was soon gonna cross over the river, and he might see Kevin. Is that right?

F: Mhm, that's right.

E: What did he say?

F: He said, "When I see Kevin, I won't embrace his spirit. My spirit will embrace his spirit, and I will tell him all is well with you." And he did because he came back to visit me one night. He was standing behind my bed, looking down at me, just a-smiling. He looked so good, too, standing behind my bed. I knew what he'd come back for. I knew what that smile was for, that he had seen Kevin.

E: So, you have had two wonderful visits: from Kevin and from Sammy Beck, also.

F: That's right.

E: I want to hear about your friends that you have now. Let's see, first of all, about your Catawba friends. You have many in Rock Hill and on the reservation yet, haven't you?

F: Yes, I do.

E: Want to tell me some of them that are special friends of yours now? You've got your own family and your friends.

F: My family and my friends. One great friend that I have is Mae Blue.

E: Are you talking about a White friend?

F: Yes.

E: Mabel Boyd?

F: Mae Blue.

E: Oh, Mae Blue! I see. What other friends especially do you have?

F: A lot that I worked with, they watched after me after my Kevin died.

E: Yeah.

F: And I had a heart attack. I didn't know if I was gonna be able to work anymore. Dr. Long said, "You go in there," and I begged to let me go back with my people that I worked with because I thought I needed them, and I did. He said, "But if you can't make it, come on out of there, and we'll put you on disability." But with all the friends that I had, if there was something I was supposed to do that was too heavy, or I couldn't lift it, they helped me. And so did my boss. So did the supervisor that I had, Rodney Davis.

E: That's good that they were looking after you that way.

F: They were looking after me, or I wouldn't have made it this far.

E: Your husband has been a minister all these years. You married him, a White man, and he was a courageous person that he married you and is proud to have married an Indian girl. This has been a loss of his own family, has it not?

F: It sure has. He lost his whole family by marrying a Indian, me. We'll be married forty-four years come March. They don't have anything to do with him, me, or the children.

E: Well, I'm sorry to hear that. But now, the White friends—I count you my friend—what other White friends you have besides me?

F: All the people that I worked with. Barbara McDaniels, she helped me all the time when I went back to work. Sue Anderson, she lives in Dallas, North Carolina. All of them helped me, so I could stay in there and be around them and work.

E: That's wonderful. And you have good neighbors where you're living here, haven't you?

F: This is a quiet neighborhood. It's a good neighborhood.

E: That's very good. What do you see of the future of your people now, maybe with a new grant going through? Do you think they'll get health benefits or education for your children? What do you see for the future of your people?

F: Everything that I see looks good. I think it's wonderful that we're supposed to get a health card that'll take care of our doctor if we have to go to the hospital and things that insurance is so high to get now. I think that's one of the best things that we're going to get is that health card.

E: And you and your family are continuing to make pottery—your children and your grandchildren. That's wonderful.

F: I wanted to teach all my grandchildren how.

E: Your mother taught you, and you're passing it on. That's a wonderful heritage you're passing to your children. You're proud to be a Catawba, aren't you? And they're proud?

F: Yes, I am. Yes, they are.

E: I understand that Kevin kept a diary before he left you. What did he say in that diary, the last words?

F: He said, “My mama is a strong woman. Heavenly Father, take care of my mama cause my mama has already, always called on Heavenly Father for all of us, and she’ll be strong enough for all of us. Heavenly Father will help my mama stand anything because my mama can do anything.”

E: Then he wrote a lovely poem, and you have that. Well, you have some blessed memories of your early life and of your family.

F: Let me tell you some about the poem that he wrote in prison.

E: All right, tell me.

F: He said, “No one heard me cry.” He said, “I fell upon my knees last night...to thank the Lord in every way for everything He’s done for me” He was in prison, so he said no one heard him cry when he talked to Heavenly Father.

E: He had friends around him; many of them loved him there. And he had friends in the heavenly world. We know that for sure, don’t we?

F: Yes.

[End of interview]

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