

CATAWBA INDIAN POTTERY



THE SURVIVAL OF
A FOLK TRADITION



THOMAS JOHN BLUMER

WITH A FOREWORD BY WILLIAM HARRIS

Catawba Indian Pottery

The Survival of a Folk Tradition

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Foreword

My grandmother was Georgia Harris, one of the greatest Catawba Indian potters. Before she died in 1996 at the age of 91, she asked her closest friend, Dr. Thomas Blumer, to deliver her eulogy. To those who didn't know Dr. Blumer, it may have seemed strange that a white scholar from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., eulogized an elderly Indian woman who had spent most of her life on or near the Catawba Indian Reservation in South Carolina. But Dr. Blumer is not simply a historian with more than 200 publications regarding the Catawba to his credit. Through his selfless dedication to the people and the pottery of the Catawba, he has become our cherished friend.

I heard about Dr. Blumer before I had the opportunity to meet him. Nearly 30 years ago, my grandmother told me about a young man who had visited her to ask questions about her pottery and the traditions of the Catawba potters. I sat in her kitchen and listened to her tell the story of the young man from the University of South Carolina who had "discovered" a wonderful art form, Catawba pottery.

Dr. Blumer became a frequent visitor to my grandmother's house, and his curiosity about Catawba pottery became almost an obsession, consuming his thoughts and most of his time. His genuine appreciation of the beauty, grace, and simplicity of Catawba pottery created a bridge between him and the usually reticent Catawba. Before long he was spending every spare moment on the Catawba Reservation, record-

ing conversations with not only the potters but other tribal members as well. With the limited funds of a doctoral candidate, with no grants or donations to help him, he dedicated himself to recording the history and art of the Catawba. And always he worked against a ticking clock, knowing that his most important resources were the elderly potters of the Catawba Nation.

Interestingly, Dr. Blumer's discriminating appreciation of Catawba pottery inspired my grandmother to produce her best work. She had learned to make pottery from her mother Margaret Harris, and from her grandmother Martha Jane Harris, who is considered to be the best of the Catawba potters. Following the example of such accomplished potters, my grandmother made pottery that was consistently excellent. Nonetheless, I can remember, as I helped her fire pots in a shallow pit in her back yard, her excitement when a pot "burned" particularly well. Her respect for Dr. Blumer's knowledge of Catawba pottery was such that she would often point to her best piece and say, "I'll bet Dr. Blumer will buy that one." And he often did, even when buying a pot meant making a choice between owning that pot and having enough food to eat the next week. He understood that each piece of pottery was unique, that it never would be duplicated by the artist or by the fire. One piece of pottery at a time, he carefully and lovingly built a collection of Catawba pottery that is unsurpassed.

When the Catawba Nation sued the state of South Carolina to settle a 150-year-old land claim, Dr. Blumer provided support in the form of historical research, and when the Catawba Nation was awarded a \$50 million settlement in 1993, no one was happier for the Catawba than Dr. Blumer.

That tangible support is typical of Dr. Blumer's relationship with the Catawba. During his early visits to the reservation, Dr. Blumer found that the Catawba traditionally learned pottery making at the knee of a family elder. His concern that too few of the younger tribal members were taking up the craft led him to encourage the older potters to teach pottery-making classes. Thanks to his efforts, a revival of interest in the making of pottery followed, and many of today's Catawba potters can look back to those classes and remember their own beginnings as potters.

Dr. Blumer's knowledge of the Catawba traditions and his love of Catawba pottery made him the perfect ambassador for the Catawba Nation. He never refused any request for information about Catawba pottery, and he never passed up an opportunity to make others aware of the treasure to be found in northern South Carolina. He graciously accepted the title of Catawba Tribal Historian and continued to donate his time to the promotion of Catawba pottery. It was through his ef-

forts that my grandmother was awarded posthumously the National Endowment for the Arts "Folk Heritage Award" in 1996. It would be difficult indeed to find a Catawba potter who has not benefited from his encouragement and patronage.

And now, with this book, Thomas Blumer benefits not only the Catawba but also anyone interested in our history or our art. It can truthfully be said that no one knows more about the history of the Catawba people than Thomas Blumer. And certainly no one knows more about our pottery. *Catawba Indian Pottery: The Survival of a Folk Tradition* organizes and disseminates his unique knowledge of every aspect of Catawba Indian pottery. It brings together the experience and knowledge of countless Catawba potters, many of whose voices have been silenced over the last 30 years. Dr. Blumer's decades of academic research complements those voices by giving depth and perspective to the personal recollections of contemporary Catawba.

Through his life's work with the Catawba Indian Nation of South Carolina, Thomas Blumer has become something of a Catawba treasure himself. Future generations will be indebted to Dr. Blumer for his lifelong dedication to understanding and recording the art and history of the "People of the River."

William Harris
Catawba Indian Nation

Preface

This volume has been too long in the making. Aside from my own distractions coming from those wanting Catawba information from me, the task of examining issues connected to Catawba history and culture is enormous. The documentation is vast and scattered. The tradition is of great antiquity and certainly deserved the attention. Also, although the Catawba survived the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most critical period in their history, they slipped into obscurity. As a result, it took far too long for the American academic community to discover this artistically lonely pottery-making community. In 1884, the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology sent Edward Palmer, a field anthropologist, to the reservation. As a result, the Smithsonian's Catawba collection dates from Palmer's field trip. It is, therefore, the oldest in the United States. George P. Merrell, John R. Swanson, and James Mooney, to name the major contributors, made additions to the collection. Then, in 1888, a South Carolina writer and would-be ethnologist, MacDonald Furman, took an interest in the Catawba and wrote about them in the local press. He alone sparked interest in South Carolina. As a result of his efforts, the University of South Carolina collection was begun early in the twentieth century. Major additions have been made in recent years by the University's McKissick Museum.

Palmer and Furman were followed by M. R. Harrington (1908), who

produced the first published examination of the Catawba tradition. V. Fewkes came next in 1944 with his longer study. Since 1944 no attempts have been made to discuss the Catawba tradition in a comprehensive way. It is, however, impossible to discuss the Catawba for very long and not touch upon the pottery made by the Indians. Nearly every scholar who has done any work on the Catawba has made some effort to bring the tradition into focus. In spite of over a century of scholarly attention, no comprehensive study of the Catawba tradition has ever been written from the Catawba perspective. *Catawba Indian Pottery: The Survival of a Folk Tradition* hopefully fills this need. At long last the Catawba themselves have a chance to speak at length about their ancestral tradition. What they have to say will help scholars move closer to a full recognition of the historical importance of the Catawba contribution. The world beyond the Catawba has much to gain as this small Nation is recognized for the cultural, artistic, and technological bridge it offers between our times and the little understood prehistory of the region.

The first thank you for standing by me in the making of this study goes to my longtime friend Brent L. Kendrick. He accompanied me on my first visits to the Catawba Reservation. Although his professional desires took him in the direction of American Literature, he never left off encouraging me during my long Catawba saga. He has been my editor and has always believed in my work among the Catawba. Over the years he has believed in the value of my study, *Catawba Indian Pottery: The Survival of a Folk Tradition*. He has always told me that, though my approach to Catawba studies came with its difficulties, my approach of dealing directly with my primary source was the key to my success. He was right, and I thank him.

Those Catawba Indians and individuals allied to the Nation who have always stood by me as mentors include: Deborah Harris Crisco, Jayne Marks Harris, William Harris, Judy Canty Martin, Billie Anne Canty McKellar, Steve McKellar, Della Harris Oxendine, Earl Robbins, Viola Harris Robbins, E. Fred Sanders, Marcus Sanders, Frances Canty Wade, and Cynthia Walsh. I owe them many thanks for years of friendship and support. Although they passed away long ago, this study is a dream come true for Georgia Harris and Doris Blue.

A huge number of Catawba have supported my work over the years and these include: Cindy Allen (potter); Hazel (Foxx) Ayers (potter); Sara Lee Harris Sanders Ayers (master potter); Richard Bailey (Sanders family); Helen Canty Beck (master potter, major history informant); Lula Blue Beck (master potter, major history informant); Major Beck (fiddler, major history informant); Roderick Beck (potters' support network); Ronnie Beck (potter, dancer); Sallie Brown Beck (master potter);

Samuel Beck (secretary/treasurer, mentor); Lillian Harris Blue Blackwelder (potter); Betty Harris Blue (potter); Brian Blue (potter); Doris Wheelock Blue (master potter, major history informant, mentor); Eva George Blue (potter); Gilbert Blue (chief); LeRoy Blue (major history informant); Mildred Blue (master potter); Travis Blue (potter); Anna Brown Branham (potter, master bead worker, language revival); William (Monty) Branham (master potter, music composer); Ellen Canty Bridges (gourd worker); Jennie Canty Harris Sanders Brindle (potter, major history informant); Keith Brown (master potter, spiritual leader); Larry Brown (potter, bead worker); Roy Brown (potters' support network); Blanche Harris Bryson (potter, major history informant); Louise Beck Bryson (master potter, major history informant); Mohave Sanders Bryson (potter); Marsha Ferrell Byrd (potter); Edwin Campbell (master potter); Nola Harris Campbell (master potter, major history informant, mentor); Catherine Sanders Canty (master potter, major history informant); Dean Canty (dancer); Jack Canty (traditionalist leader, assistant chief); Jerum Canty; Ronald Canty (potter); Paige Childress (potter); Deborah Harris Crisco (traditionalist leader, mentor); Alberta Canty Ferrell (master potter); Betty Blue Garcia; Guy Garcia (major history informant, drummer); Beckee Simmers Garris (potter, dancer); Charles George (flint knapper); Cindy Ayers George (bead worker); Elsie Blue George (potter, major history informant); Evans (Buck) George (assistant chief, history informant); Evelyn Brown George (master potter, major history informant); Phillip George (wood carver); Isabelle Harris Harris George (potter); Kristen George (potter); Landrum George (major history informant); Mandy George (potter); Marvin George (potter, major history informant); Susan George (potter); Wayne George; Cheryl Gordon (potter); Faye George Greiner (potter, basket maker); Alice Harris; Bertha George Harris (master potter, major history informant); Beulah Thomas Harris (master potter, major history informant); Curtis Harris (potter); Donald Harris (master pipe maker); George Furman Harris (major history informant); Georgia Harris Harris (master potter, major history informant, mentor); Grady Harris (major history informant); Ida Harris (potter); Little Leon Harris; Melvin Harris (major history informant); Minnie Harris Sanders Harris (potter); Peggy Thatcher Harris (potter); Reola Harris Harris (potter); Richard Harris (major history informant); Walter Harris (potter); Wesley Harris (potters' support network); Wilburn Harris (major history informant); William Douglas Harris (wood carver, potter, traditionalist leader, chief); Gail Blue Jones (potter); Brandon Leach (potter); Miranda Leach (potter); Trisha Leach (potter); Faye Robbins Bodiford Lear (potter, spiritual leader, major history informant); Billie Anne McKellar (master potter, mentor); Ann Sanders Morris (potter); Denise Ferrell Nichols (potter); Dawn McKel-

lar Osborn (potter); Sherry Wade Osborn (potter); Della Harris Oxendine (master potter); Donnie Plyler (potter); Elizabeth Plyler (master potter); Olin Plyler (wood carver); Big Bradley Robbins (potter support network); Earl Robbins (master potter, mentor); Flint Robbins (potter support network); Frank Robbins (potter support network); Little Bradley Robbins (potter); Viola Harris Robbins (master potter, mentor); Albert Sanders (chief, major history informant); Brian Sanders (master potter); Caroleen Sanders (master potter); Cheryl Harris Sanders (master potter); Clark Sanders (potter); E. Fred Sanders (potter, major history informant, traditionalist leader, mentor, councilman); Freddie Sanders (master potter); Marcus Sanders (master potter, traditionalist leader); Randall Sanders (potter); Verdie Harris Sanders (potter); Willie Sanders (major history informant); Jimmy Simmers (potter); Shelly Simmers (dancer); Pearly Ayers Harris Strickland (potter, major history informant); Virginia Blue Trimnal (major history informant); Roger Trimnal (major history informant, traditionalist leader); Margaret Robbins Tucker (master potter); Matthew Tucker (potter); Shane Tucker (potter); Ruby Ayers Brown Vincent (potter); Florence Harris Wade (potter); Frances Canty Wade (potter, major history informant, mentor); Gary Wade (major history informant); Sallie Harris Wade (potter, major history informant); Clifford Watts (major history informant); Eber White (major history informant); Charlie Whitesides (potter); Velma Brown Whitesides (arts and crafts authority); and Clara Sanders Wilson (traditionalist leader).

Those who are allied to the Catawba Nation through marriage and contributed to the success of my work include: Eddie Allen (flute maker); Mae Bodiford Blue (potter); Dennis Bryson (potters' support); Willie Campbell (potters' support); Jayne Marks Harris (artist, potters' support); Judy Leaming (support of traditionalist faction); Steve McKellar (artist, potters' support).

A large number of institutions have always stood ready to assist me in my research needs. These include Carolinian Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia; Catawba Nation Archives, Catawba Nation, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Chester County Museum, Chester, South Carolina; Children's Museum, Charlotte, South Carolina; Dacus Library, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Katawba Valley Land Trust, Lancaster, South Carolina; Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, Columbia; Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina; Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Charleston, South Carolina; Museum of York County, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Qualla Cooperative, Cherokee, North Carolina; Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina; Smithsonian In-

stitution, Washington, D.C.; South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia; University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; University of North Carolina, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, Chapel Hill; Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia; York County Library, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

A growing number of scholars have taken an interest in the Catawba and the following have generously given me their time and expertise: Ruth Byers, York County Library, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Tommy Charles, University of South Carolina, Columbia; Joffre L. Coe, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; R. P. Stephen Davis Jr., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Michael Eldredge, Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina; Barbara Frost, Cinebar Productions, Newport News, Virginia; Tom Johnson, Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia; Rita Kenion, Archaeologist; Mary Mallaney, York County Library, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Robert Mackintosh, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia; Alan May, Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina; Phil Moody, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Lindsay Pettus, Katawba Valley Land Trust, Lancaster, South Carolina; Louise Pettus, local historian, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Brett H. Riggs, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Blair Rudes, University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Tom Stanley, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina; Sherry Staples, Cinebar Productions, Newport News, Virginia; Ann Tippitt, Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina; Gene Waddell, College of Charleston, South Carolina; Steve Watts, Catawba Village Exhibit, Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina; Terry Zug, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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1 Discovering the Catawba

The Catawba Indian Nation of South Carolina occupies a 640-acre reservation eight miles east of Rock Hill, South Carolina. About 2,200 Indians are listed on the tribal roll (U.S. Department of the Interior 2000). Perhaps another 1,000 Catawba descendants are located outside of South Carolina in Oklahoma, Colorado, and other places. From the time of the American Revolution to the end of the nineteenth century, the tribe was dangerously close to extinction. During this period they lost most of their culture.

The tribal government's powers rest in a general council of unknown inception. Daily business is conducted by an elected chief and an executive committee consisting of an assistant chief, secretary/treasurer, and two councilmen (Catawba Nation 1975). Even though the language officially died in 1952 with the death of Sallie Brown Gordon, some knowledge of the language remained, and today the tribe is experiencing a language revival of sorts (Anna Brown Branham, personal communication, 1999–2002). In the area of religion, the "old way" survives only in the belief in minor woodland deities called the *yehasuri*, or the wild Indians (Blumer Collection, Edinburg, Virginia, [BC] 1985). In the realm of arts and crafts, an occasional blow gun is made. Catawba songs are often mere melodies containing words that lost their meaning to most tribal members long ago. Catawba still know their herbs, but their non-Indian neighbors are apt to use the same remedies. Their once complete culinary art has been reduced to a simple recipe for ash cakes. Some beadwork is produced, but it is of a pan-Indian variety. A few men make walking sticks and burn designs into them and other wooden objects. The triumph of the Catawba Nation rests in its pottery tradition, which is a cultural treasure of tremendous worth. Of all the tribes east of the Pueblo only the Catawba have preserved their aboriginal pottery-making tradition. At the least, the pottery tradition represents an unbroken line between generations from the Woodland to the present. At the most, it represents a much older time.

The Catawba aboriginal technology is not only intact but shows signs of continuing resilience. Today approximately 75 adults and 25 children make pottery. The majority of the adult artisans have contributed to this study and have helped make it a comprehensive Catawba statement. Other tribal members, including non-Indian spouses, who cannot or do not make pottery actively supported this study and the potters' efforts by digging clay, gathering wood, burning pottery, and helping with sales.

The survival of the Catawba and the Catawba pottery tradition is complicated. While forces beyond the Indians' control had their impact, the Catawba owe no outsiders any gratitude for the survival of their pottery tradition. All tributes go to a long line of Catawba potters, both male and female, who stubbornly followed their ancient craft. For nearly two centuries of great economic and cultural stress, roughly from 1776 to 1945, pottery was often the only means of subsistence. Yet, even during this period ironies abound. Making and selling Indian pottery is a difficult way to earn a living. If Catawba pottery had been an avenue leading to at least economic comfort, those who unwittingly contributed to the demise of the Catawba Nation would have copied the Indian potters. Instead, low proceeds protected the Indians; the tradition was not worth emulating. Today we are the benefactors of this complicated set of circumstances as we appreciate and purchase fine examples of Catawba pottery. And, more importantly, the Catawba owe their survival as a people to their pottery. Without pottery there would be no Catawba Nation today. Pottery is the key to the strong cultural revival among the Catawba, for the potters lead the way.

Although the Catawba survived through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most critical period of their history, they slipped into obscurity. It took American academics a long time to discover this isolated Indian pottery-making community. In 1884, the United States Bureau of Ethnology sent Edward Palmer, a field anthropologist, to the reservation (Holmes 1903:55). Today, the Smithsonian's Catawba collection dates from Palmer's field trip and is the oldest in the United States. Then in 1888 a South Carolina writer and would-be ethnologist, MacDonald Furman, took an interest in the Catawba and wrote about them in the local press (Furman 1888). He alone sparked South Carolina's interest in the Catawba.

My great adventure with the Catawba Indians began in June 1970. I was a Ph.D. candidate at the University of South Carolina, and my task at hand was to write a term paper on an obscure South Carolina writer. The temperature outside was in the high 90s and the relative humidity about the same. Inside Caroliniana Library the atmosphere