

# **Thomas John Blumer Collection on the Catawba Nation, 1756 - Present**

## **Biographical Sketch**

### **Thomas J. Blumer**

Ethnohistorian, folklorist, editor and Native American Studies consultant. Native of Freeport, N. Y.; educated University of Mississippi (BA 1967, MA 1968) and the University of South Carolina (PhD 1976)

Senior Editor, Office of the Law Librarian, Library of Congress (1993-retired 1998); Senior Editor, European Law Division, Law Library, Library of Congress (1978-1993); Catawba Tribal Historian for the Native American Rights Fund (1979-1993); Tribal Historian, Catawba Indian Nation (1994-1998); Consultant in American Indian History and Culture (1977- ) for Catawba Indian Arts and Craft Association; Archivist, Laura Virginia Hale Archives, Warren Heritage Society, Front Royal, Va. (2002-2004); Magistrate, Shenandoah County, Commonwealth of Virginia (1999-2002)

Dr. Blumer has written the following autobiographical sketch, focusing on his Native American studies:

Life for me began in Freeport, New York at 7:00 am on July 7, 1937. I was the seventh child my parents Gordon and Viola looked forward to raising. I had one sister June Ruth and a brother John who died at birth. All of my mother's other attempts to have a child other than my sister ended in disaster until their son Tom entered the picture.

My schools consisted of the public schools of Freeport and catechism at Holy Redeemer Roman Catholic Church. My entire childhood was dominated by the Church, and this pattern continues here in Lancaster, South Carolina. My major identity is as a Roman Catholic and a Southerner. I have been to Rome five times and want to go once more before I die. Dixie has my heart and is my home.

My first exposure to an American Indian was at Jones Beach, not far from Freeport, where I had the bliss of listening to Princess Rosebud tell Indian stories. I can't remember what she said, but if I were an artist I could paint her portrait. She was the most beautiful woman I had seen up to the age of five. My library at home included a little picture book entitled "Indians of America." I spent hours dreaming over the pictures on each page. A copy of this book remains a part of my library today.

In November of 1949 my intellectual life took a dramatic turn in the direction of the Native American. My family subscribed to "Life Magazine", and one of the November issues included a color photo essay of the discovery of Bonampak, a Maya site that contains spectacular pre-Columbian art. This magazine started me on a Maya search that continues today. It was impossible for me to read and see enough.

At the age of twelve, I asked my dad to take me to the New York Museum of Natural History on Manhattan Island. His response: "Can you make a sandwich?" "Yes, Sir." "Do you have money for the Long Island Railroad and the Subway?" "Yes, Sir." "Okay, on Saturday get up early, make a sandwich and walk to the railroad station. Get off the train in Manhattan and catch an "A" train. It will take you to the Museum. If you get lost ask a man for directions. The man must have a hat." I listened and went alone and learned the New York Subway System in short order. Once I even went to the Bronx Zoo and saw my first palm tree. It was in a huge pot. I was thrilled.

By the age of 15, I was using New York Public Library and wrote a very detailed history of the Blumer family. I studied Chichen Itza for years and even produced a model of the site for wood shop. I wish I still had it. When I was 16, I found a job on a farm in St. Lawrence County, New York. Most of my time was spent suffering in the hay fields. On one weekend I went to the county fair and met some Mohawks, the first Indians I really had a chance to converse with. The next week I visited the St. Regis Reservation on the Canadian border. My collection still contains baskets that I purchased during this period. My focus on the American Indian never waned.

In 1956, I joined the United States Navy to escape my parent's rule and to see the world. As luck would have it, I attended a school in Oklahoma, Indian Country. I visited a commercial Indian village and saw a number of typical dwellings. My tour was given by a Caddo. He responded in disgust when I asked him if he grew up in one of those houses. I purchased a Caddo dance mask which hangs on the wall in my living room in Lancaster.

The rest of my military career was blessed by one trip to Cuba, then under Castro; a North Atlantic cruise to Scotland and England; and two Mediterranean cruises. I had the good fortune to visit much of Europe. I had the wisdom to visit Rome four times. A side trip included Switzerland where I visited the home canton of the Blumer family, Glarus. I did my best to soak up the cultural treasures of Europe.

Upon my discharge (four years, two months, and four days later) I met a lovely Indian girl of Tarrascan descent. We married and had four children: Theresa, Susannah, Mary and John Jakob. We were both from strict Catholic backgrounds and I thought I was set for life. In 1965 my wife and two oldest children left Virginia and resettled in Mississippi where I attended Old Miss. Mary and John were born there. In three years I obtained both a BA and a MA in English under one of the finest men I have ever known other than my dad, Dr. James Savage. We returned to Virginia where I began my teaching career at Tidewater Community College in Portsmouth.

Backtracking a bit, Mississippi provided a crucial step in the development of my American Indian interests. One of my neighbors in student housing was Sam McGahey, an archaeologist. He introduced me to relic hunting on Sardis Lake. I soon collected a large number of points and began to purchase Mississippian Culture pottery from sources in Arkansas. These things remain in my collection here in Lancaster. As I left Mississippi, Sam convinced me that encouraging pothunters to desecrate Indian sites was immoral.

My interests shifted to collecting contemporary Indian art. Sam set the stage for my Catawba work.

Upon my arrival in the Tidewater area of Virginia, I met Eddie Bottoms, who is an historian/archaeologist. He introduced me to the Pamunkey Indians of Virginia and I began to collect contemporary pottery. By the time I left Virginia for the University of South Carolina in 1972, I had a large collection of Pamunkey wares, all kiln fired and painted with commercial paint. These vessels are found in my collection today.

My life took a dramatic turn in 1970 with my PhD studies in Columbia, [S.C]. My wife abandoned me and successfully hid my children from me until they reached adulthood. In essence I lost everything of value. Survival was at the top of my parents' list of desires for their son. Part of my effort to find a life that had some value was to obtain a doctorate. At the start of my USC career I took a course in Southern Literature. My term paper topic was not quite what I envisioned. This was before air conditioning and the South Caroliniana Library was hot. I sat in a puddle of sweat and looked for an escape. I thought, "Are there any Indians in this state?" Escaping, I went to the catalog and discovered the Catawba in the person of master potter Doris Blue. The Catawba saved me and became my extended family.

My pottery collecting began that same night. Today my collection contains well over 1,000 vessels and is in the control of the Katawba Valley Land Trust here in Lancaster. The papers which I began collecting in 1970 are present in the Thomas J. Blumer Catawba Archives in the Medford Library at the University of South Carolina Lancaster. These papers include everything I could locate during my years working with the Catawba. To my good fortune, the Native American Rights Fund who handled the Catawba's suit against South Carolina and the Federal Government hired me as Catawba historian in 1979. After the Settlement of 1993, I shifted over to serve the Catawba Indian Nation as their official tribal historian. During this long period my access to tribal documents was vast. These papers are all here in this collection. Also included are over

6,000 slides and photographs too numerous to count, field notes, field tapes, and copies of all my many lectures and publications. From 1997 to 2005, I produced political journals. These are currently closed to research but will open in 2024. These unpublished volumes contain all aspects of contemporary Catawba life. The archives include a comprehensive published Catawba reference collection.”