

Lawson's journals record local Indian life in 1700s

One of the earliest accounts of the Catawba Indians, and the only account of the Waxhaw Indians, comes from the journals of John Lawson. Lawson, like so many Englishmen of his day, was excited by a returning traveler's account of Carolina. Indians, New World plants, teeming forests and dreams of riches caused bright young men like John Lawson to come see for themselves.

It was Dec. 28, 1700, when Lawson left Charles Town for a 26-day journey into the interior of the Carolinas. With great foresight, Lawson had secured the title of surveyor general before leaving London. The appointment enabled him to secure the best guides available.

Travel in January in swampy country was miserable. The first part of the journal is largely accounts of half-flooded canoes and wet bedding. Finally, the party managed to secure aid in crossing the Santee River and to locate the "high ground" path that would take them to the Catawba Nation.

On Jan. 9, Lawson's party reached the Santee Indians, who welcomed them warmly. After feasting on bear's oil and barbecued turkey and venison, the group moved on to a series of Indian villages. Lawson observed the gambling games of Indian women and listed their multiple uses of Spanish moss. He ate corn mush, dried peaches and venison stew thickened with ground hickory nuts or "chinkapins."

With unusual perception, Lawson recorded the vast differences in culture and physical appearance of tribes who lived not more than 20 miles apart.

On Jan. 16, 1701, Lawson arrived at present-day Camden and found the Wateree-Chickanee Indians, a tribe much taller than other Indians. While generous in feeding the travelers, he reported that the Chickanees stole everything they could get their hands on. Not only did they steal with their hands, but with their feet as well. As soon as possible, Lawson got away from them.

The route Lawson followed is now roughly S.C. 261, which connects Charleston and Camden. North of Lancaster, the

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Indian Land native Louise Pettus is an area historian.

main path would be closer to the river than U.S. 521 is now until north of Van Wyck, where it would veer to the northeast along Henry Harris Road and would turn westward along Harrisburg Road into North Carolina.

Off the main trail, there would be many paths to at least seven Catawba Indian villages. The Waxhaw Indians, who lived north of what is now Lancaster and just south of the Catawba Indians, had larger cabins and cleaner cooks, and proved to be superior hosts.

Lawson was fascinated by the way the Waxhaws shaped their infants' heads. The back of the baby's head was placed on a bag of sand with a second bag pressing on its forehead. The infant was then strapped to a board for months. Neighboring tribes called the Waxhaws "Flat Heads." The child grew up "straight as an arrow." Lawson added that the treatment made "the eyes stand out in a prodigious way asunder, and the hair hangs over the forehead like the eaves of a house." The Waxhaw Indians were convinced that the treatment gave them superior eyesight and made them expert hunters.

Lawson reported that the Waxhaws respected age, built their round houses out of bark, starved their dogs (he thought the dogs were half-tamed wolves) and overfed their horses. The dancers and dancers' dress were described in minute detail. Lawson listened to the chants and accounts of their history. He observed that the Waxhaws were "great observers of moral rules," however little they practiced them. Lawson found little difference in behavior between Waxhaw cabins and the Salisbury court in England.

When Lawson got into Catawba Indian land, he found

a Scot from Virginia, John Stewart, who had traded with the Catawbias for a number of years. The Scottish trader amazed Lawson with the information that he had known for 20 days of Lawson's coming. Drums had carried the message of Lawson's departure from Charles Town.

The Catawba Nation was large. Estimates of the Catawba population ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 in scattered villages, before smallpox epidemics greatly reduced it. Lawson wrote that the largest Catawba (he spelled it "Kadapau") village had 17 houses.

Lawson was not so much impressed by the housing as he was by the great flocks of ducks and pigeons.

Pigeons "were so numerous in these parts that you might see many millions in a flock; they sometimes split off the limbs of stout oaks, and other trees, upon which they roost o' nights." He found that in several of the larger villages "more than 100 gallons of pigeons oil, or fat; they use it with pulse, or bread, as we do butter..."

"The Indians take a light, and go among them in the night, and bring away some thousands, killing them with long poles, as they roost in the trees." When migrating, the pigeon flocks "obstruct the light of the day," he wrote.

John Lawson's journals are the best eyewitness account of South Carolina's Indian tribes. The journals were published as "A New Voyage to Carolina" in London in 1709.

Two years later, still surveyor general of North Carolina, Lawson was captured by Coree and Tuscarora Indians, who were convinced that he intended to take over their lands. They tortured and killed him by driving pineknot splinters into his body and setting him afire. It was a sad ending for the gentle journalist whose sympathetic portrayals of early life in the Carolina backcountry have proven to be invaluable.

Louise Pettus' Panhandle Past column runs once a month. If you have a question about Indian Land's past, call (803) 283-1154 or e-mail your question to cgnews@thelancasternews.com.

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