

In early 1900s, Penn. prof detailed Catawba culture

4 natives were able to help him chart parts of old language

Beginning in 1913, Dr. Frank Speck (1881-1950) visited the Catawba Indians near Rock Hill almost yearly, spending anywhere from several days to a month at a time. Speck, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., was an ethnographer - one who studies technologically primitive societies. In 1913, the Catawbas were still using a bow and arrow, and there were four who could recall some of the native language.

Speck had been a student of Franz Boas, which gave him opportunities to publish and a special status in the small world of professional anthropologists during the years before World War I.

Speck's broad interest was in the Eastern Woodland Indians - their cultures, languages, religious practices, tools, pottery and handicrafts.

He became a recognized authority on the Algonquians and did much work with the Cherokees. Sometimes Speck came to the Catawba Reservation with his wife, Florence, sometimes with a colleague, but usually he was alone.

Easygoing and cheerful, he was a great storyteller and encouraged the Catawbas to swap stories with him. He became a friend and lent them money. After Speck became chairman of the department of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1925, he got several grants to aid his research. He always generously shared the grants with the Catawbas, who assisted him in his studies of their culture.

Speck, in "Catawba Texts," published in 1934, concluded the Catawbas were the last speakers of the eastern Siouan language. By 1913, most of the language had been lost, but Speck got enough to develop a phonetic system to record the words and short stories told him by four people: Samson Owl (1847-1934), Margaret Brown (1837-1934), Sally Gordon and Sam Blue, the last two the children of Margaret Brown.

Willard Hayes, who taught at the Catawba school from 1935 to 1942, once said that Speck came and "recorded everything that he possibly could from Chief (Samuel) Blue in the way of their stories and their history ..."

Blue was a very religious man, and Speck taught a course, "Primitive Religion," at the University of Pennsylvania. They had long discussions. Speck later wrote the Catawbas were the only tribe in the United States "where conversion to the religion of the white man shifted a whole group from paganism to Christianity in the Mormon path."

Speck was a competent naturalist and a capable amateur archaeologist. His diverse interests are reflected in his published

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work. He wrote dozens of articles with titles such as "Ethnoherpetology of the Catawba and Cherokee Indians." A widely acclaimed study proved the connection of the modern ceramic work of the Pamunkey Indians and the work of the Catawbas.

The Pamunkey were native to Virginia and sheltered the Catawbas' women and children when the Catawba warriors were fighting for South Carolina during the Revolutionary War.

A monograph, "Catawba Hunting, Trapping and Fishing," is of particular interest locally. Writing in the 1940s, Speck noted that the Catawbas hunted 10 varieties of mammals, three varieties of birds and 13 varieties of aquatic life. They used five killing weapons, five types of traps for warm-blooded animals and six for se-

curing fish. The book was illustrated with pictures made by Speck of the old-style fish basket, bird trap, crossbow, poison dart and rabbit box, as well as the houses and the people.

Speck collected all the information he could on how the weapons and traps were used by the older Indians. For instance, Margaret Brown told him that in the old days, the Catawbas got the poison for the arrows from the maxillary glands of a type of snake that lived in the bottom land. The poison was placed on meat and let stand in small pots before use. The bows were made of locust wood and the arrows of cane attached to either hickory or sourwood. The arrow's rudder was the feather of a hawk or a swift.

The field notes of Speck's visits to the Catawbas are at the University of Pennsylvania.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

