

PETTUS

MISSIONARIES TO THE CATAWBAS

For more than a century and a quarter, white missionaries attempted to convert the Catawba Indians to their various denominations. None had any success until 1883. The Presbyterians had begun the efforts with Hugh McAden appearing in 1755, followed by the Rev. William Richardson in 1758.

William Richardson, a native of England and a graduate of the University of Glasgow, was ordained as an Indian missionary in July, 1758 while in Virginia. On his way to the Cherokee nation, Richardson visited the Catawbas in what is now York and Lancaster Counties.

Richardson talked with King Haiglar, considered the greatest of the Catawba chiefs. He fervently tried to explain to Haiglar that men do not "die like Dogs," but have a soul, which he described as "something different," that survives them. Haiglar, pretending he knew no English, listened to the translator and then told Richardson that the time was not right. He said the people were busy and it was the hunting season but he politely invited Richardson to return. Richardson returned to the area in 1758 to become the first pastor of the Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church.

In 1791 Bishop Francis Asbury and Dr. Thomas Coke preached to the Catawbas and attempted to convert them to Methodism with no success. In the early 1800s the Baptists, especially with the assistance of the Flint Hill Baptist Church in Fort Mill district, attempted to Christianize the Catawbas. Schoolhouses were built near the Catawba towns and the ministers served as schoolmasters. One of the ministers was a Church of Christ Pamunkey Indian by the name of Robert Mursh who married a Catawba Indian woman.

The Catawbas were always polite to the "Sunday Men" and an occasional Catawba joined one group or another, but, for the most part, they were not persuaded. Richardson's successors met the same frustration as that described by Richardson when he talked with King Haiglar: "When the Discourse was about Corn &c. he seemed to understand, but anything else he seemed at a loss."

In May 1883, two Mormon elders, Charles E. Robinson and Henry Miller, met with some Catawbas in Fort Mill. On November 11, 1883 Miller and Joseph Willey (Robinson having died in September) baptized their first five Catawba converts. Other converts followed and a Sunday School was organized within a few months.

Why were the Mormons successful where the others had failed? Charles Hudson, a noted anthropologist and investigator of the Catawba culture, states: "Even though the Catawbas had several means of maintaining a semblance of Indian identity, in the late 1800's and early 1900's they were steadily losing their culture. In 1900 less than a dozen Catawbas could speak the language. As a means of increasing their separateness from non-Indians, while at the same time realizing other advantages, the Catawbas made a bold decision: they became Mormon converts."

Hudson points out that, from the beginning, the Mormons were dedicated to reconverting Indians who, according to Mormon teachings, are descendants of the Lamanites, a group of Israelites who came to the New World around 600 B.C. The Catawbas were attracted to the Mormons because they were offered a status not granted to them by local whites, says Hudson.

. The Catawbas were also attracted to the Mormon Zionist movement which associated the church with land in the West. In February 1887 a group of eight Catawbas left for Colorado to pave the way for others to follow. The Catawbas did not move because they had neither the money nor any encouragement from the Office of Indian Affairs to allot them Western lands.

A few years after the first Mormon elders visited the Catawbas, a church was built by Orlanda Harris, a Mormon elder who might be termed the last of the missionaries. Of the 100 Indians on the reservation at that time, 50 were listed as Mormons. By the 1930s 95 per cent of the Catawbas were active Mormons.