

*Native American Studies Collection*  
*University of South Carolina Lancaster*



WW II photograph. L to R: Garfield Harris and his brother Wilford

**Garfield Crawford Harris Collection**  
(1914-1994)

(Updated 4/13/2016)

Volume: 3.75 Linear Feet

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**Biographical Note:**

The following was written by Dr. Thomas Blumer after the death of Garfield Harris.

“Catawba Indian Autobiographer Passes”

“I was born March 14, 1914, between midnight and day.” Thus begins the direct opening statement of Garfield Harris, who for many years had planned to write “his story.” Actually begun in September 1993, his autobiography preserves bits and pieces of Catawba history in a way uniquely his own.

He was the son of Theodore and Artemis Harris, both Catawba Indians. His father was a sharecropper and his mother, a graduate of Carlisle Indian Industrial, kept the home and made Catawba pottery. The family totaled 11 children in all.

School began for Garfield at age seven in 1921. He was always studious and liked the learning process, but school was difficult for him, for early in life he faced adult chores around the house and in the cotton fields. He received his schooling at the Catawba Indian School, founded in 1896 and closed in 1966. While hundreds of Indian children there learned to read, write and calculate, only Garfield Harris aspired to write his autobiography. His spotty attendance record however, surely impressed his teachers negatively. Chores came first:

*“I only have seven grades in school. My dad was a farmer, and he didn’t believe in kids going to school. When farming time came, it was in March. If I was in school, I had to stay out to clear up the field and to plant, cut sprouts and briars, corn stalks and cotton stalks to start plowing. Next, cotton had to be hoed. When we finished, I was able to go back to school for two weeks. We took our exams in May.”*

When Garfield had time left for study, it was often late at night. And the family often didn’t have money for kerosene to fuel the lamps. His solution was found in pine knots. He gathered them for their steady, bright light. Then after dinner, he would light one and study by it “until one or two in the night.”

His formal schooling ended in 1929 at the age of 15. He went to work on the nearby Sullivan farm for 50 cents a day in summer and 40 cents a day in winter, working from “Sunday to Sunday.” He knew he was fortunate to have even this meager income because the family could do much with so little. His earnings made his 1933 marriage to Ruthie Harris possible. After two years, they separated.

In 1936 he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and left the Catawba nation for the first time.

*“I remember the day we left. We met a bus in front of People’s Bank in Rock Hill and left early in the morning for Columbia...I kind of got homesick but stayed.”*

From Columbia, the group was sent to Pennsylvania where Garfield was impressed by the “hard winter.” In the spring he was transferred to Salina, California. His last written statement concerns the joy of seeing the country:

*“I learned a lot about traveling and it was a wonderful experience which came in handy in later years.”*

While Garfield’s personal account ends with this brief comment, the historical documentation picks up at this point. When WWII broke out, Garfield joined the US Army and served in North Africa. Upon returning home, he went to work for the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company (the Bleachery). In 1950 he was elected to the Catawba Indian Nation Tribal Council and served several terms under Chiefs Nelson Blue and Ephraim George. In 1958 he was again elected to the Council under Chief Nelson Blue whose task it was to guide the Catawba Nation through the termination of Federal status. Chief Blue resigned, and Garfield continued to serve under Chief Albert Sanders. Frustrated by the way Catawba assets were being terminated, he resigned in June 1959. Some months later, he married Olga Fowler.

The last years of Garfield’s life were spent nursing his wife and preparing his autobiography. While he did not live to complete the story, his brief contribution to Catawba written history is important for its deep sincerity. Perhaps this is most evident in his description of a house his parents rented from fellow tribal member Davis Ayers:

*“The floor was fit together with rough timber, and you had cracks in the floor. You could feed chickens through the cracks. You got plenty of wind from them. We had to put sacks on the floor to keep the wind out...The shingles were made out of oak. When it rained, you had to set pots around to keep your bed from getting wet. As soon as the shingles got wet and swelled, the leaking stopped...I enjoyed my life and was as happy as anybody. We lived through it all, and I am still going on.”*

### **Scope and Content Notes**

The collection consists of 3.75 linear feet of material. The journals begin in 1950 and span 45 years. They are a chronicle of daily life on the Catawba Indian Nation and are filled with accounts of the weather and events that Garfield found interesting. Many journals resemble scrapbooks, containing clippings, obituaries, and other ephemeral items.

The 1983 journal contains Garfield’s “Remembrances”, autobiographical accounts of reservation life between the World Wars and Garfield’s military experiences. Of special note are his California experiences. Garfield, a Native American is a guard at a Japanese American internment camp. He also talks about seeing the Navajo (the Navajo wind talkers) practice their signals across the valley.

Garfield was a devoted husband, and Olga the great love of his life. The two fell in love but separated due to the South Carolina ban on interracial marriage. They married in 1959, when the

law was abolished. A long and happy marriage ensued with Olga predeceasing Garfield. From this point, almost all journal entries are addressed to his “dearest, darling.”

Many journals contain handwritten indexes created by Dr. Blumer.

The collection also contains some of Garfield’s personal effects such as marriage certificates, an honorable discharge from the Civilian Conservation Corps and various clippings. Of special interest is the unique family blood type shared by his family. The Harris variant was so rare the American Red Cross created a special category for it, and researchers around the world requested samples for study. Further folders include a small correspondence file, and Mormon Church materials.

### **Folder List of Contents of the Garfield Crawford Harris Papers 1936-1995**

34 Folders:

Journals (30 folders)

1950-1953, 1956-1961, 1963-1965, 1972-1973, 1076-1989, 1992-1994

Correspondence, 1938-1995, n.d.

Personal Effects, 1932-1947, n.d.

Mormon Church Materials

22 Photographs, 6 negatives (US Army, circa 1941)

2 bound volumes:

*Official Annual 1936*, Civilian Conversation Corps, District #2, Third Corps Area  
(water damaged)

*Historical and Pictorial Review: 183<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery and Anti-Tank Battalion 76<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade*, Ft. Francis E Warren (water damaged)