Helen Jeffcoat Interview

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SC: [00:00:03:000] Alright, well, how should we start?

CJ: [00:00:03:000] Where were you born?

HJ: [00:00:03:000] I was born in Orangeburg County.

CJ: [00:00:03:000] What was the name of the town?

HJ: [00:00:03:000] Orangeburg [laughter].

CJ: [00:00:13:000] You lived in Orangeburg County but there wasn’t a name for the crossroads or anything?

HJ: [00:00:13:000] No, we lived in town when I was born, but my mother, she was from the Springfield-Neeses area.

CJ: [00:00:13:000] Oh, okay.

HJ: [00:00:24:000] And that’s where a majority of the people here are from.

CJ: [00:00:24:000] Both your parents were Indian?

HJ: [00:00:24:000] No, just my mother. My father’s Irish.

CJ: [00:00:24:000] And what was your mother’s name?

HJ: [00:00:24:000] My mother was Cammie Ola Chavis.

CJ: [00:00:36:000] Father?

HJ: [00:00:36:000] John Franklin Kerry.

SC: [00:00:36:000] Tammie Ola?

HJ: [00:00:36:000] Cammie, with a C.

SC: [00:00:36:000] Cammie. And Chavis?

HJ: [00:00:47:000] Chavis. And both her parents were Chavis. Both of them were Indians.

CJ: [00:00:47:000] Did you know you were an Indian your whole life?

HJ: [00:00:47:000] All my life. I feel sorry for someone saying they’re just discovering it. But I knew it all my life and so did my mother and so on. So, you know, no surprise.

SC: [00:01:06:000] Did you share this with people?

HJ: [00:01:06:000] I was told not too much. Mostly, in public, white. Since, no problem having a white father. But, at home we discussed it.

HJ: [00:01:21:000] But if someone walked up and asked my mother ‘What are you?’ because you know, they knew, then she would open up. And rightfully so because I was proud of it. And when we studied what little bit in school, I was proud.

HJ: [00:01:38:000] My mother is Native. And then I’d get called fun of over that. So, I understood why.

SC: [00:01:38:000] Did she identify herself—did she call herself Indian? Is that the word she used?

HJ: [00:01:54:000] Mostly, if someone asked her. You know, that was before it was politically correct to say anything special.

SC: [00:01:54:000] Did she identify with any particular tribal group?

HJ: [00:01:54:000] Yes, she was told she was lower Cherokee mixed. There wasn’t a pure line. That lower Cherokee mixed, that’s what she always would say.

SC: [00:02:14:000] The idea that the Cherokee mixed with another tribe?

HJ: [00:02:14:000] Tribe.

SC: [00:02:14:000] And lower Cherokee? So, southern Cherokee?

HJ: [00:02:14:000] That’s what she would say. Lower Cherokee.

SC: [00:02:26:000] Okay. And did she—both of her parents?

HJ: [00:02:26:000] Both of her parents. They were first cousins.

SC: [00:02:26:000] Where were they from?

HJ: [00:02:26:000] Neeses and Springfield area.

SC: [00:02:26:000] Okay, did you know them?

HJ: [00:02:40:000] I knew my grandmother. My grandfather died when my mother was young. She was around 10 years old when he died.

SC: [00:02:40:000] Do you remember your grandmother when—how much time did you spend with her?

HJ: [00:02:53:000] Off and on a good bit because when we lived in Florida she followed momma down there too, so there was a connection.

SC: [00:02:53:000] Did you think of her as Indian?

HJ: [00:02:53:000] Oh yes. I’d get angry when I wasn’t allowed sometimes to say strictly Native.

CJ: [00:03:12:000] Did you live in an Indian community in Florida?

HJ: [00:03:12:000] Oh no. Right in the heart of Jacksonville.

CJ: [00:03:12:000] The heart of Jacksonville. And why did you come back to this area?

HJ: [00:03:12:000] I was 11 years old when we moved back to South Carolina. But I was 13 or 14 when we moved back to Orangeburg.

CJ: [00:03:30:000] And how long have you been a member of the Beaver Creek and been involved in this community?

HJ: [00:03:30:000] Since its inception. And that was 2000, something like that.

SC: [00:03:41:000] And it’s the Chavis family primarily.

HJ: [00:03:41:000] Right.

SC: [00:03:41:000] So your great grandparents…your mother’s grandparents were both Chavis’s. They were first cousins.

HJ: [00:04:00:000] Yes. My grandmother, both her parents were Chavis. And even when her father died, her mother married another Chavis. So, they kept it together.

SC: [00:04:14:000] The tribe goes back to one particular [inaudible]. Is that right?

HJ: [00:04:14:000] Oh, I knew, before I even joined, back to James Chavis, and then being with them for this study, going on back about two more generations. Everybody agrees to Lazarus.

SC: [00:04:36:000] Okay. So James Chavis—what year is that?

HJ: [00:04:36:000] You know, it’s not definitive year, you know. But around 1795 he was born. He disappeared 1860, so I assume he died by that point.

SC: [00:05:00:000] Were you told much of the family history growing up? The Chavis history?

HJ: [00:05:00:000] Well not going that far back, very little. But, yes I was told plenty of stories. A lot of them in general.

HJ: [00:05:13:000] Abraham’s father or Abe’s uncle, you know, something like that. I knew one of my great, great grandfathers worked on the river and at the time I didn’t know it was James. But, me doing my own research I found out he was arrested.

HJ: [00:05:30:000] And like I said, I had heard little bits and pieces and this was the story. My grandmother, she did what she could but it was her husband’s wives [?] that kept most of the stories up until that point alive. [Inaudible] died when my momma was young and he carried the alcoholic trait.

HJ: [00:05:48:000] It was very little she could get from him but what she did, they were the most useful stories. A lot of it died with him. My grandmother, she tried to carry on some of the traditions of storytelling and then my mother to me and now me to my own children.

HJ: [00:06:07:000] So, we have kept some of the family history going.

SC: [00:06:07:000] Can you tell us something?

HJ: [00:06:07:000] My grandfather, Clarence, always said he had the spirit of a deer because it is a known fact that he could run about as fast as a deer.

HJ: [00:06:26:000] He would run faster than the police chasing him when he was drunk [laughter]. They would be in the vehicle and he would make it home, going over fences and through the woods.

HJ: [00:06:39:000] There was nothing they could do. And that’s one of my favorites. Like I said, they had told little bits and pieces of the stories of my great, great grandfather, Wilbur [?], and his encounter with the gators.

HJ: [00:06:57:000] A story about one time a white couple took them up, excuse me, down the river towards Charleston area. And [he] helped save the lady or something to that effect.

HJ: [00:07:11:000] He was awarded a gold coin, a twenty dollar piece. You know, little things like that. And really, as a young person, you don’t know if they’re true or not because you’ll find census records that will validate that a little bit.

CJ: [00:07:28:000] What’s the gator story?

HJ: [00:07:28:000] There was supposed to have been an extra large, monster gator on the river that they had encountered. But it was the story that they would see it on the river, not really wrestle it.

CJ: [00:07:28:000] So the legend of the great gator.

HJ: [00:07:44:000] Yeah, the legend.

SC: [00:07:44:000] So what would happen if you weren’t careful? What happens if you run into it?

HJ: [00:07:44:000] He was supposed to have been a monster one.

SC: [00:07:54:000] Yeah, he’d do what a monster does.

HJ: [00:07:54:000] At times they would see it at a distance but it’s like, you know, maybe it didn’t bother them because being in tune with nature and stuff.

SC: [00:08:05:000] And is this the Edisto River we’re talking about?

HJ: [00:08:05:000] Yes.

SC: [00:08:05:000] Well, I’ve got to ask. You talk about your grandfather and the spirit of the deer, at least when he’d been drinking. Was he drinking—

HJ: [00:08:19:000] Moonshine! It’s all moonshine most of the time.

SC: [00:08:19:000] Did he make it?

HJ: [00:08:19:000] Oh, yes. My momma said the best in South Carolina.

SC: [00:08:19:000] Really?

HJ: [00:08:19:000] Yes.

SC: [00:08:19:000] Well what makes it the best?

HJ: [00:08:31:000] It just the way he, I guess, made it. He used to blend a lot of time other potatoes and the corn. And he had his own special recipe.

SC: [00:08:43:000] Did he have the still out hidden somewhere?

HJ: [00:08:43:000] Yeah, it was hidden, but I mean it was on his own property.

CJ: [00:08:43:000] You know where it was?

HJ: [00:08:43:000] Yeah [laughter].

SC: [00:08:43:000] And I guess the police chasing him.

HJ: [00:08:43:000] You know, he made it mostly for him and his family but he would sell…

NOTE: [00.08.55.000] BREAK IN RECORDING

SC: [00:09:01:000] Were these local police that would chase him?

HJ: [00:09:01:000] Yes. No revenue.

SC: [00:09:01:000] Yeah, actually local police are better. Well, can you recall any other uses for the shine?

HJ: [00:09:15:000] Oh yes, sure. It could be used in like a hot toddy or consumption. Stuff like that, yeah.

SC: [00:09:15:000] You remember, you ever come across anybody putting herbs or so forth into—sort of preserve them?

HJ: [00:09:34:000] Roots like sassafras and stuff like that, yeah. We used them…my grandmomma, even when I was young. And her grandmother was considered a root worker.

SC: [00:09:49:000] Really?

HJ: [00:09:49:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:09:49:000] You remember any of that?

HJ: [00:09:49:000] No, she died when I was a baby so I only know her through the stories.

SC: [00:09:49:000] How would your family define root worker?

HJ: [00:10:02:000] Well she would pitch the medicines and she would dabble in the spirits [gestures with hands].

SC: [00:10:02:000] Oh okay, so both beneficial and occasionally—

HJ: [00:10:02:000] Right, eventful.

SC: [00:10:15:000] You remember any stories about that?

HJ: [00:10:15:000] Oh yes, she hated my father. And she was supposed to have set my daddy’s car on fire.

HJ: [00:10:25:000] She was the last one seen near it, it was a family gathering, and even though they said she was 100 when she died she was still kicking around. And she was supposed to have been messing with something in the glove box.

HJ: [00:10:38:000] She was looking for a pencil or something. But they believed she put something in it because when the time to cut the car on when it was time to leave—whoof! [imitates sound of fire starting].

SC: [00:10:38:000] And this was root work rather than arson? [laughter]

HJ: [00:10:51:000] Right. But mostly they would come to her if a child was sick or anything. But yeah, she was supposed to have worked a whole range of arts.

SC: [00:10:51:000] Did you ever hear stories of, speaking of root work, of the old hag?

HJ: [00:11:06:000] Oh yeah. I believe in all this stuff. It’s been handed down to me, I know this. But yeah, I know of old hags—they change. And families encountered shape shifting.

SC: [00:11:28:000] Now were these the ones that would take their skin off or did they just change their shape?

HJ: [00:11:38:000] Changed their shape. We believe mostly they go—now, there’s spirit shift. They’re there physically but they project their spirit you know, into—

SC: [00:11:52:000] Are these the kind that bother people when they’re sleeping? There’s some kind of tradition where—

HJ: [00:11:52:000] Yeah, a hag does. A hag, yes.

HJ: [00:12:02:000] To protect yourself from a hag you get salt and put it around your bed. And to keep it from coming across your doorstep you put salt—three lines of salt.

SC: [00:12:15:000] Oh, three?

HJ: [00:12:15:000] Yeah. And certainly, they’re real powerful. You may have to take a piece of silver and put it in your window.

SC: [00:12:27:000] What about broom bristles?

HJ: [00:12:27:000] Yes, I’ve heard that some people believe that.

SC: [00:12:27:000] [inaudible] Seems like the salt, from what I’ve heard, the salt crystals—they’re compulsive and they have to count.

HJ: [00:12:41:000] Count, yes. You put them around the bed and they try to get up in the bed with you, they’ve got to count every one of them before they get [inaudible]. And that’s impossible. [laughter] And if you have animals and they can’t get to you they will [inaudible] your dogs or cat.

SC: [00:12:59:000] Really? Really?

HJ: [00:12:59:000] We had that happen to one of ours.

SC: [00:12:59:000] That may explain our dog [laughter]. One more question about root work.

SC: [00:13:15:000] Did you ever encounter—I don’t know if it’s around this area, but I lived in Louisiana for a little while and we noticed that people had roosters or chickens in their front yard.

HJ: [00:13:25:000] Oh yeah, cut the head off. Well, tie the feet of a black hen…at least inside, cut its head off to counteract a spell.

SC: [00:13:25:000] Now also, sometimes apparently the chickens were good at hunting out roots.

HJ: [00:13:43:000] Right. There’s a lot to make of it.

CJ: [00:13:43:000] Tell us about your craftswork. You’re an artist.

HJ: [00:13:54:000] Ah yes, I’ve been certified through the state, through the tribe. Right now I’m mostly making pouches for the dancers or medicine bags. I have made some dance sticks, some regalia, ribbon shirts mostly.

HJ: [00:14:26:000] Oh goodness, so much. I’ve done so many [inaudible], but I do not do too much because there are some in the tribe that are certified to do that so I leave that alone.

HJ: [00:14:38:000] I do do medicine wheels. But I like mostly working with the wood and leather and I believe in recycling in this modern day, so I try to get that older—I mean, go to thrift stores, buy leather coats, strip them, wash them, stuff like that.

HJ: [00:15:00:000] I do believe in trying to reuse these things. Although I have had hundreds [inaudible].

CJ: [00:15:11:000] What besides the sticks do you make out of wood?

HJ: [00:15:11:000] Well, that is mostly what I do is the dance sticks. I have made a few coup sticks and yeah, a couple spirits. But, mostly dance sticks for dancers.

CJ: [00:15:29:000] And you’re self-taught?

HJ: [00:15:29:000] I am self-taught.

CJ: [00:15:29:000] When did you start?

HJ: [00:15:29:000] Seriously, about ten years ago. But since I was about five, my momma introduced me to sewing and making things, so it goes back to my childhood.

SC: [00:15:46:000] Do you remember other people from your childhood who would make things?

HJ: [00:15:46:000] Oh yes. Even though I was with the most privileged, I know the stories of my mother and her mother because when we come up here back to South Carolina to my grandmother’s house, it was an outdoor toilet.

HJ: [00:16:06:000] And I didn’t know what it was. I would call it a shelf and visit the shelf. So even though I didn’t live it every day, I did experience the hardship in this rural community.

SC: [00:16:27:000] When did they get indoor plumbing?

HJ: [00:16:27:000] [laugher] Oh, it’s always been around.

SC: [00:16:27:000] In the rural, rural part.

HJ: [00:16:27:000] Well I guess it was really my grandmother in the 60s.

SC: [00:16:40:000] Yeah. What about electricity? That was earlier?

HJ: [00:16:40:000] Oh yeah, there was a light on that house even through here in the late 50s, early 60s.

HJ: [00:16:58:000] My mother had an aunt who had heated floors.

SC: [00:16:58:000] Really?

HJ: [00:16:58:000] Over there in the Neeses area.

CJ: [00:17:06:000] You say you’re a certified artist through the tribe. Tell us about that process. How does that work?

HJ: [00:17:11:000] Oh, I had to—I picked what I wanted to present to the tribe and I presented to Chief Louie and a few others from the Council. And they examined it.

HJ: [00:17:25:000] I had to explain it to them—what it was and how it was made and what it was made of. One example was I made a child’s moccasins and it all had to be handmade.

HJ: [00:17:39:000] Then after they see that everything was authentic, I was then certified, through him and the State Minorities Affairs, I think that’s what it is.

CJ: [00:17:56:000] So how does—there’s the new law in the last few years that allows [turkey?] feathers. Has that affected your work in any way?

HJ: [00:17:56:000] You know, I always try not to use too much of it. But I can do like, on some of the dance sticks, more.

HJ: [00:18:12:000] I try to use the wild turkey, but I do try to stay away from that as much as possible.

SC: [00:18:12:000] Anything you want to say about being a member of the Beaver Creek tribe?

HJ: [00:18:30:000] Well, it’s an honor to be here with y’all, and I appreciate y’all letting me speak. Being Native is an experience that is very hard to explain because some people embrace you and want to—they see the movie in you, you know.

HJ: [00:18:50:000] That’s what they want you to sit down and describe, something like all of that. Others feel, they push you away. Although, it’s a little bit [**break in recording – Helen Jeffcoat recordings 1 &2 are the same. Tape picks back up with recording #3**]

HJ: [00:18:50:000] Better now. Open up to all.

HJ: [00:19:07:000] I was raised in [inaudible] white. But I was never kept anything secret about my Native heritage. My mother was proud of it.

HJ: [00:19:18:000] She would tell me, even back in the 30s Neeses there was a woman still dressed Indian. Miss Ida, that’s what momma would call her.

HJ: [00:19:31:000] She still dressed Native. My momma would see her all the time on the porch or yard when I’d walk to school.

HJ: [00:19:44:000] She’d say she’s still some distant cousin, but you know, you don’t really know where it comes in the family. They called her Miss Ida. And it does my heart good when I hear that still in our memory these things are still there.

CJ: [00:19:59:000] She would dress in buckskin?

HJ: [00:19:59:000] Yes. And she was an elderly lady. Momma would call her Miss Ida.

CJ: [00:19:59:000] She was elderly in the 30s?

HJ: [00:19:59:000] Yes.

CJ: [00:20:14:000] Thank you, Helen.

SC: [00:20:14:000] Thank you very much. You did great. And I hope we can come back and talk some more.

HJ: [00:20:14:000] Oh, any time.

SC: [00:20:14:000] Talk more about hags. I want to learn as many ways to protect myself [laughter].

SC: [00:20:26:000] The three lines of salt I haven’t heard, so I’ll have to add that to my…My students have said do you believe in that. I believe everything! I don’t want to take any chances.

HJ: [00:20:26:000] Well, I believe it because I’ve seen it.

HJ: [00:20:39:000] I didn’t put it on camera, but my father, he practiced it a little bit when my momma first met him. But he wasn’t a good one.

SC: [00:20:39:000] Ah!

HJ: [00:20:52:000] My momma changed him. He ended up being Christian and a preacher! [laughter] So he went from bad to good. So, it’s in the family on both sides. It’s not that—I had some experience in that.

SC: [00:21:08:000] Well, and a lot of it ended up being traditional cures and that sort of thing. It’s what you had to do when there wasn’t a doctor around. Somebody had to know what to give you, how much of it to give you.

HJ: [00:21:17:000] Yeah, and just like I never found sick and I really really blame myself because a lot of that I do have notes going back for years that my grandmother—she was the one that could stop the burns from talking.

SC: [00:21:34:000] Oh, she talked the fire out of them?

HJ: [00:21:34:000] Sweat speed the fire out and stop the blood. She knew the word.

CJ: [00:21:34:000] How does that work?

HJ: [00:21:34:000] She knew the word.

CJ: [00:21:34:000] What kind of words were there?

HJ: [00:21:44:000] It was handed down. It had to be handed down to a male.

SC: [00:21:44:000] She knew it? It was handed down to a male?

HJ: [00:21:44:000] She had to hand it down.

SC: [00:21:44:000] Oh, she had to hand it down to a male.

HJ: [00:21:44:000] Right. I wasn’t next in line. Female to male, male to female.

SC: [00:21:58:000] This is when you get a burn.

HJ: [00:21:58:000] Yes, she could stop the fire and she could stop the bleeding.

SC: [00:21:58:000] Did she say a prayer over it?

HJ: [00:21:58:000] Yes, it was basically like a prayer.

SC: [00:22:08:000] Was it a Christian prayer or a sort of general prayer?

HJ: [00:22:08:000] It was a mixture—some—a mixture of both.

SC: [00:22:08:000] Did you have any—

HJ: [00:22:08:000] Spider webs help stop it.

SC: [00:22:08:000] Spider webs? For the bleeding?

HJ: [00:22:23:000] Oh yeah. It’s got to be clean though. From the yard.

SC: [00:22:23:000] What about people who could—have you had warts—they could talk to them?

HJ: [00:22:36:000] Yeah, yeah. Get a piece of cooper, rub it on a wart. If it’s not a penny, toss it. You can do that to a chicken bone, too.

SC: [00:22:36:000] Really?

HJ: [00:22:36:000] Yeah. Take the chicken bone, can’t see where you land.

HJ: [00:22:51:000] But if it’s a penny you’ve got to put it with somebody else who’ll spend it or put it where you’ll forget about it. You can’t take it and spend that money.

SC: [00:22:51:000] Oh, you can’t spend it.

HJ: [00:22:51:000] Either one. It’ll take warts off.

SC: [00:23:05:000] The fire talking, the folks who do the fire talking…

HJ: [00:23:05:000] Yeah, my grandma used to talk to fire.

SC: [00:23:05:000] There seems to be something to that. Maybe it’s psychological, maybe it’s mystical.

HJ: [00:23:17:000] It happened. It can happen. You can do it. I’ve seen it.

SC: [00:23:29:000] Anything else you want to hear? [laughter]

HJ: [00:23:29:000] I told you I like rolling my mouth. It’s just the camera makes me nervous. [laughter]

CJ: [00:23:38:000] You didn’t seem nervous to me.

SC: [00:23:38:000] Hopefully we can come back and talk to you.

HJ: [00:23:38:000] Okay, I know y’all got other people.