John Barry Chavis Interview

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SC: [00:00:00:000] And you are the former chief?

JC: [00:00:00:000] Former chief.

SC: [00:00:00:000] Alright. Where were you born?

JC: [00:00:00:000] Orangeburg County, right in the town of Orangeburg.

SC: [00:00:00:000] In the town of Orangeburg. Grew up there?

JC: [00:00:14:000] My family moved from Orangeburg when I was around eight or nine years old.

SC: [00:00:14:000] Where did they move to?

JC: [00:00:14:000] Columbia.

SC: [00:00:14:000] Columbia, good. Work move?

JC: [00:00:26:000] My father changed jobs.

SC: [00:00:26:000] What did he do?

JC: [00:00:26:000] He was a farmer when we lived in Orangeburg County. And then he went to work with a church company.

SC: [00:00:41:000] And did your family talk about being Native American?

JC: [00:00:41:000] I did not really realize that I was Native American until I was in the seventh grade.

SC: [00:00:41:000] Well how?

JC: [00:00:57:000] The reason I found this out is because in one of the history books they mention part of the South Carolina Indians, which was a very short paragraph.

JC: [00:01:06:000] I just happened to read that and the fact that it was from the history book showing a picture of the Indians with a deer carcass over their backs—you probably have seen this before.

JC: [00:01:22:000] Anyway, I spoke with my father about that, reading that in the book, and he looked at me and said ‘Well you’re an Indian too, son.’ And from there I just got interested in it and wanted to find out where I really came from.

SC: [00:01:37:000] And did he tell you much?

JC: [00:01:37:000] He didn’t tell me much because he did not know much. And I think the reason is because my father came from a family [inaudible – chatter in the background].

JC: [00:01:48:000] And his father was an old man when he married his wife. My father was about ten or eleven. He didn’t get to speak much with his father about it. In fact, back in the days when he was a little kid [inaudible] speak were the only people.

JC: [00:02:06:000] Because that was a no-no. You were not supposed to bring up that conversation. So he heard.

SC: [00:02:06:000] So your father’s father was Indian?

JC: [00:02:19:000] Yes.

SC: [00:02:19:000] Okay, what about his mother?

JC: [00:02:19:000] My…?

SC: [00:02:19:000] His mother.

JC: [00:02:19:000] My mother’s grandmother was an Irish lady. She was born in—well, came from Irish people out of Ireland. She was very light skinned.

SC: [00:02:36:000] Around what year was your father born?

JC: [00:02:36:000] My father was born in 1919.

SC: [00:02:36:000] 1919. And you said his father was an old man when your father was born.

JC: [00:02:46:000] My grandfather was around the middle of sixty-nine years old when my father was born. He had two other children besides my father. He was in his early seventies having children, which was very common. He had kids in the late years.

SC: [00:03:05:000] I’m hoping there was more than one wife [laughter].

JC: [00:03:05:000] Yeah. And the reason being he was married three times. The first and second wife died in the early thirties.

JC: [00:03:16:000] And of course he left all alone living out in the country. He was a farmer whose children could be good for crops.

SC: [00:03:16:000] So his third wife—third wife, your grandmother?

JC: [00:03:16:000] My grandmother.

SC: [00:03:16:000] You remember much about her?

JC: [00:03:36:000] Yes. In fact, I went to [inaudible] and stayed the whole summer [inaudible]. And she told me a lot of things about my grandfather that I can remember.

JC: [00:03:50:000] And sent me photographs of him. Very dark skinned fellow. And when he stood next to her in the old photograph, about early 30s, had his arm around her shoulders, and they looked like interracial marriage [laughter].

JC: [00:04:11:000] He was dark and she said that he was a dark skinned man.

SC: [00:04:11:000] Did she indicate if he ever had any difficulty, being darker skinned and being married to a lighter skinned woman?

JC: [00:04:24:000] She didn’t say anything about that and the reason is my grandmother married my grandfather when she had a child out of wedlock before they were married. Back in those days was—looked down when people did that.

JC: [00:04:40:000] And I don’t think she was really too happy being married. I think she married because she figured she might get in a little trouble under the circumstances. But they lived a good life, happy.

SC: [00:04:55:000] And he farmed?

JC: [00:04:55:000] He farmed, yeah.

SC: [00:04:55:000] In Orangeburg?

JC: [00:04:55:000] Orangeburg County. Near a town called Great Branch.

SC: [00:05:04:000] Great Branch.

JC: [00:05:04:000] When grandfather went on the [inaudible], pulled on the Edisto River right out along the shore where his father had property.

JC: [00:05:14:000] And I was told that my grandfather at one time was one of the best farmers around Orangeburg County. The other farmers would come to him to get advice on what to do when the crops started to fail, like going downhill.

JC: [00:05:30:000] Fertilizers, things like that. In fact, he said [inaudible]…He did more than what the state would recommend. [inaudible]

SC: [00:05:51:000] Do you remember his name?

JC: [00:05:51:000] His name was Joseph Harmon Chavis.

SC: [00:05:51:000] And what did he grow?

JC: [00:05:51:000] Just typical farm products: corn, wheat, no tobacco. No tobacco around this area. Sweet tomatoes, potatoes.

SC: [00:06:12:000] Did he grow cotton?

JC: [00:06:12:000] Yes, he grew cotton. I remember hearing about the cotton fields.

SC: [00:06:12:000] Do you know when they introduced soy beans to this area?

JC: [00:06:22:0000] I would say, uh, probably early 30s or 40s. He passed away in 34 so it would have to be before 34.

SC: [00:06:37:000] Driving in, it seemed like a lot of soybean farmers in this area.

JC: [00:06:37:000] Yeah. I think it’s increased since the early years.

SC: [00:06:50:000] Let’s see. Let’s talk about your experience being chief. How did that come about?

JC: [00:06:50:000] Well I started in 1966. September of 66.

JC: [00:07:07:000] Tracing back my family—side of the family—my grandfather—because I was interested in the background of the Indian.

JC: [00:07:18:000] Let’s see, in 2000, moved back together. I’m sorry it was 99. Got back together [inaudible – conversation in background].

SC: [00:07:37:000] So how did you all come together? Just family or—?

JC: [00:07:37:000] Well, we based it on family gathering. Later, a get together for the community.

SC: [00:07:53:000] So the group came together. How did you all know about each other?

JC: [00:07:53:000] You know, family just kind of kept in contact with each other. We were not like first cousins or anything.

JC: [00:08:06:000] We were distant related, but we all related back to the people we formed the group together.

SC: [00:08:14:000] Were there family reunions, that sort of thing going on too?

JC: [00:08:14:000] As a tribal group?

SC: [00:08:14:000] Well, just as sort of the extended family, whether it’s cousins or second cousins.

JC: [00:08:26:000] The Harmon family’s always had some type of family reunion. In fact, Joseph Harmon James family reunion we have every year. And now it’s going into about the 60th year. And it was started as my grandfather’s present.

SC: [00:08:26:000] Ah, with all those twenty two children in other families.

JC: [00:08:43:000] Yeah. You got spreads of children, grandchildren. We’ve had as many as three, four hundred at our reunion.

JC: [00:08:53:000] As far as the tribal group that gets together, we have a once-a-year tribal gathering, which is like a family reunion.

SC: [00:09:01:000] So I interrupted you there. In 99 the parties came together and decided they wanted to have a tribal. Where do you go from there?

JC: [00:09:11:000] From 99 until about 2000, we had ups and downs. Sometimes we didn’t get along with each other. In about 2000 I resigned. But I’m still [inaudible] chief.

SC: [00:09:34:000] At the time you were chief was the state recognition program set up?

CJ: [00:09:34:000] There was an ad hoc committee that had been started?

JC: [00:09:48:000] Yeah.

CJ: [00:09:48:000] Now when you were chief, was the main the Beaver Creek Pee Dee?

JC: [00:09:48:000] It was the Beaver Creek Band of Pee Dee Indians.

CJ: [00:09:48:000] Band of Pee Dee Indians.

SC: [00:10:01:000] Where’d the Pee Dee part come from?

JC: [00:10:01:000] Well, I won’t call any names, but some of the folks that help organize and bring the tribe all back together, they were saying that we were related to the ones, the Chavises in the Pee Dee area.

JC: [00:10:17:000] I feel that we are related way, way, way backwards. It’s so far back. I think separating the names is best because [inaudible – talking in the background].

JC: [00:10:36:000] But I think we are sent back from the original Chavises, from where I don’t know.

SC: [00:10:36:000] I was going to ask if you knew where the Chavis—because the Chavises show up in North Carolina, South Carolina.

JC: [00:10:47:000] Well I think that comes about because I was told, I believe, that these Chavises come from France. And I believe they just came over here and [inaudible – loud background noise] Native American women.

JC: [00:11:03:000] I think that’s where the blood line comes from. That is my opinion. I can’t prove it, but that is my opinion.

SC: [00:11:03:000] Like the French trappers and the sort?

JC: [00:11:03:000] Yeah.

CJ: [00:11:13:000] Well a lot of French Huguenots come to South Carolina, particularly to this area. 18th century.

SC: [00:11:27:000] You said you discovered your Native identity in the seventh grade. Did you ever have any problems, run into any difficulties?

JC: [00:11:36:000] Not really because I feel like in the area that I grew up in we didn’t have that many—back when I went to school the school was un-integrated.

JC: [00:11:50:000] It’s like, a person of my color, I guess I was not dark enough to be [inaudible – loud background noise].

SC: [00:11:50:000] And there wasn’t a separate Indian school?

JC: [00:12:01:000] No. Now from what I understand around here, the town of Neeses [inaudible] Pentecostal church, Four Pines School.

JC: [00:12:15:000] And I’ve seen a photograph. There was a school there and they were related to my grandfather. I mean, that was all in that community there.

JC: [00:12:26:000] People down there were just dark skinned. You could tell they were Native Americans.

SC: [00:12:26:000] So they weren’t going to be accepted into the white school.

JC: [00:12:26:000] Yeah. I know my dad told me one time there was some [inaudible – loud background noise] around Neeses and he says, ‘Barry,’ he says, ‘I know the people couldn’t help it.’

JC: [00:12:40:000] He says, ‘They were dark skinned. [inaudible – loud background noise] white people.’ Well that’s just the native skin.

JC: [00:12:49:000] He didn’t know how to explain it but he knew it was Native American blood Indian. They were relatives of his.

SC: [00:13:00:000] Do you know if any of your grandfather’s—the other two wives, if they were Native?

JC: [00:13:00:000] I think maybe the first one, I believe, was related back into the family history. The last name was Yon, Y-O-N.

SC: [00:13:20:000] Was what?

JC: [00:13:20:000] Yon. Y-O-N.

SC: [00:13:20:000] Y-O-N.

JC: [00:13:20:000] And they were tangled back up with the southern Chavises.

SC: [00:13:40:000] They have, the Yons, was their branch of the family closer to down in Congaree Swamp area? That name sounds familiar.

JC: [00:13:53:000] I’m not sure. The Yons were in and around the Orangeburg area. Neeses, where my grandfather lived.

SC: [00:14:06:000] It’s an interesting name. It seems like I’ve come across it somewhere. Chris, questions?

CJ: [00:14:17:000] How do you think that the state recognition process has gone? Has that been good for any of the people in the state of South Carolina?

JC: [00:14:17:000] Just for the tribe itself?

CJ: [00:14:17:000] Yeah. I mean has becoming recognized by the state benefited Beaver Creek?

JC: [00:14:31:000] I think it’s brought a lot more people around and they’re getting interested and learning more about it. I think at one time they figured ‘This is just a group sitting around. What are they going to do?”

JC: [00:14:45:000] There are also people that say ‘Well, what’s in it for me?’ Now they find out that they’re state recognized and they’ll be proud of their heritage.

CJ: [00:15:00:000] We just had the census, of course. How many Beaver Creek live in this area? What are the numbers?

JC: [00:15:09:000] Speaking of the Orangeburg area? Between here and Orangeburg? I’d probably say about 55, 60, or 70.

CJ: [00:15:09:000] In that big of an area?

SC: [00:15:09:000] No, no, no, out of the tribe.

CJ: [00:15:26:000] Oh, there’s 50 or 60.

JC: [00:15:26:000] Oh, probably about 40% of the folks that are on the roll now in this area.

SC: [00:15:26:000] How many people are on the roll?

CJ: [00:15:26:000] How many people total on the roll?

JC: [00:15:41:000] I used to know that. I would say that there are five, six hundred.

JC: [00:15:53:000] One time we had like twenty-one hundred that were registered. Had names, paperwork finalized.

CJ: [00:16:18:000] So you have to go through a process of submitting paperwork to be on the tribal roll? You have to show your genealogy and your family background? Is that how that works?

JC: [00:16:28:000] [inaudible -- loud background noises]

CJ: [00:16:39:000] Anything else you want to tell us about today?

JC: [00:16:39:000] [inaudible -- loud background noises]

JC: [00:17:04:000] My father, when he was younger, he couldn’t even drink a lick. As he got older, he quit all that.

JC: [00:17:17:000] I heard the other lady being interviewed talking about sassafras. My father’s sisters used to make sassafras.

JC: [00:17:33:000] She one time she went to [inaudible] and I went with her. And she was having [inaudible] with her friend, probably her boyfriend, and she didn’t know [inaudible] root doctor.

JC: [00:17:44:000] I happened to go to her house. She had just got home. So I got to her house and she had this bag.

JC: [00:18:01:000] She was along the outside of the house sprinkling it. I said ‘what is that?’ She said it was ground red pepper. She was sprinkling this around the house, all the way.

JC: [00:18:18:000] I said what are you doing that for? She said [inaudible] she went to see the root doctor and he told her to put all this on the outside of the house and he would not harm her.

SC: [00:18:32:000] Would it keep him out of the house?

CJ: [00:18:32:000] What was the red stuff made out of?

JC: [00:18:32:000] It was crushed red pepper.

CJ: [00:18:32:000] Crushed red pepper.

JC: [00:18:41:000] And something else in that red pepper, but I don’t know exactly what it was.

SC: [00:18:41:000] [inaudible – loud background noises]

JC: [00:18:41:000] It’s kind of [inaudible – loud background noises] root doctor.

SC: [00:18:59:000] So they must be in a lot of trouble. [laughter]

JC: [00:18:59:000] I know my dad said one time he was going to see the root doctor. I thought ‘What is he talking about?’ But then later on, yeah, I kind of figured out what he was talking about.

SC: [00:19:12:000] Is that the term they use, though? Root doctor?

JC: [00:19:12:000] I think it is. The person who’s supposed to use all the spells and different medicines.

JC: [00:19:24:000] My family was a lot of fishermen in the family. Loved fishing.

SC: [00:19:24:000] What’d they fish for?

JC: [00:19:33:000] Well [break in recording]

SC: [00:19:44:000] They do any net fishing?

JC: [00:19:44:000] I think they must have just done pole fishing. Cane poles.

CJ: [00:19:59:000] What about setting out a line? Set line?

JC: [00:19:59:000] Yeah, well, make the fish baskets.

SC: [00:19:59:000] Oh did they?

JC: [00:20:09:00] Yeah, chicken wire, a rectangle or square looking thing. The fish would go in and can’t get back out. Those were for the rivers, were called traps.

CJ: [00:20:28:000] Made by chicken wire.

JC: [00:20:28:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:20:28:000] You ever see anybody make them out of wood?

JC: [00:20:28:000] No.

SC: [00:20:28:000] Further in the Upstate I know a woman who makes them out of white pine. I have one in my office. Same contraption.

JC: [00:20:48:000] I’ve seen this guy around this part. I didn’t know him real well but he used to tell me he’d go around to the river with a long, like a speared point.

JC: [00:20:59:000] Stand right in the shallow part of the river and the fish come along and he had to spear them.

CJ: [00:20:59:000] Gigging spear?

JC: [00:20:59:000] Oh yeah.

SC: [00:20:59:000] Did he go flounder gigging?

JC: [00:21:14:000] Uh, not too much. I’ve heard some people doing it but it’s not as popular as fishing.

CJ: [00:21:14:000] Did you eat turtles?

JC: [00:21:14:000] Excuse me?

CJ: [00:21:14:000] Eat turtles?

JC: [00:21:14:000] I don’t, no.

SC: [00:21:14:000] Just like chicken [laughter]

CJ: [00:21:14:000] Just like chicken.

CJ: [00:21:38:000] Anything else?

JC: [00:21:38:000] Oh, I can probably think of a dozen things.

CJ: [00:21:38:000] We’ll come back to all of it.

SC: [00:21:47:000] What I’d like to do is send down a camera or two or a reporter or two and just sort of pass them around, let you record things. If you’ve got kids or grandkids, let me go and interview grandparents, aunts, and uncles. That sort of thing.

SC: [00:22:02:000] Give them a chance to kind of talk to each other. Then we can put it all on CDs. Because I know there are things that we ask as outsiders and then there are things that we don’t even think to ask.

SC: [00:22:17:000] And then there are things that insiders don’t think to ask because it’s like ‘Oh, well everybody knows that.’

JC: [00:22:17:000] I remember one medicine my grandpa used to make. It was ingredients of whiskey, sugar, and camphor.

SC: [00:22:35:000] Camphor?

JC: [00:22:35:000] Camphor. You mix this together and you rub it on your chest.

SC: [00:22:35:000] Camphor’s in vapor rub. Where’d you get the camphor?

JC: [00:22:47:000] I don’t know. I guess…I don’t know.

SC: [00:22:47:000] Tell us about the people who talk to fire or have a burn. You remember that?

JC: [00:23:00:000] Yeah. There’s a cousin who just passed away. He could talk the fire out of you. If you burn your hand, he could talk it out.

JC: [00:23:16:000] And another thing, when I first moved onto my property where I’m at now, I had to drill for water. And he went out and got a stick just off of a fruit tree.

JC: [00:23:31:000] It was like pointed, Y-shaped. And he said ‘We’ll find you water.’ And I said ‘Oh, you crazy.’ And he and his brother did it.

JC: [00:23:42:000] He tried to show me but it did not work for him, but his brother got it. He walked around and he was holding that—he called it a divining rod.

CJ: [00:23:42:000] Yeah.

JC: [00:23:51:000] He’d hold that down and that thing would start pointing down at the ground. And I thought ‘This is…he’s making this up.’ He said, ‘You take a try. You walk over there and come back this way.’

JC: [00:24:05:000] Sure enough, I put it here and I walked over this way. And when I got over that place he’d made a mark with his foot, that thing went straight to the ground and I couldn’t hold it back.

JC: [00:24:23:000] Some people can do it. Some can’t. He said that was the old Indian way, but I don’t know. That’s what I was told, so.

CJ: [00:24:30:000] Now talking fire, I had a question about that. Both you and Hazel sort of indicated that the healer might put their hand on the burn. You both made a motion like they would stick their hand on it and then talk to them.

JC: [00:24:44:000] It stayed there about 30 minutes.

CJ: [00:24:44:000] The hand would be on it for thirty minutes?

JC: [00:24:44:000] Yeah. And they would sit. They’d just meditate. They wouldn’t say anything.

CJ: [00:24:54:000] Denies it oxygen or something. Makes it heal faster or something.

SC: [00:24:54:000] What about some of the [inaudible]?

JC: [00:25:19:000] I know that they used to take and chew on a piece of pine straw. Say that would clean your root.

CJ: [00:25:35:000] I’ll have to try that.

SC: [00:25:52:000] I remember reading on the website about grave decorations, the shells. Tell me a little bit about that.

JC: [00:26:02:000] Well the ones that I’ve seen decorated have got to be…the place where my grandfather’s buried or the other Chavis relatives.

JC: [00:26:12:000] They just take and kind of go on the outside, all the way around with seashells.

SC: [00:26:12:000] Are they seashells—ocean seashells?

JC: [00:26:23:000] That’s what it looks like to me. I think they call it conch shells.

SC: [00:26:23:000] Oh, okay. The white with the—and they do it around the—?

JC: [00:26:23:000] All the way around the perimeter.

SC: [00:26:23:000] The perimeter of it. Not just at the top?

JC: [00:26:23:000] No.

SC: [00:26:37:000] Are there ever jars on those—upside down jars?

JC: [00:26:37:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:26:37:000] Okay, because I’ve seen that in some cemeteries in South Carolina.

CJ: [00:26:37:000] The conch shell goes way back to prehistory. We’ve seen that in the archeological record in a number of places.

SC: [00:26:51:000] I can’t remember why the jars. I’ve heard stories about those. You don’t know why they—?

JC: [00:26:51:000] No, but I have seen them on the graves. Not very many, but I have seen them.

SC: [00:27:07:000] And this is where? At that—?

JC: [00:27:07:000] Beaver Creek Baptist Church.

SC: [00:27:07:000] [to CJ] Have you been out there?

CJ: [00:27:07:000] No.

SC: [00:27:07:000] Okay. [to JC] Where is that?

JC: [00:27:17:000] It’s going to Neeses on the highway. It’s about two miles this side of Neeses. It’s a very old church, been there since about 1852.

CJ: [00:27:37:000] The church is still active?

JC: [00:27:37:000] Yeah. Many people buried there with no graves.

JC: [00:27:45:000] In fact, they was telling me that so many people buried there that sometimes they’ll dig a grave that’s not marked and there’s two or three down already buried there.

CJ: [00:27:45:000] Can you see depressions in the ground or anything?

SC: [00:27:56:000] Yeah. That’s why we need the x-ray machine to go out.

CJ: [00:27:56:000] Have a look, see where they are? Alright, thank you.

SC: [00:28:09:000] Thank you very much. I hope that we can some back and talk to you.

JC: [00:28:09:000] Alright. Maybe I’ll think of something else [laughter].

SC: [00:28:09:000] Well we’ll send you a little recorder, a little handheld recorder. I’ll mail those.