Chief James Caulder Interview

Interviewer: Chris Judge; Interviewee: Chief James Caulder; Transcriber: Jillian Weber; Interview takes place at the Pee Dee Powwow. Drum group and loudspeaker in the background

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JC: [00.01.03.000] My name is James Caulder. I am the chief of the Pee Dee Indian Tribe of South Carolina. We are located in upper Marlboro County in South Carolina.

JC: [00.01.14.000] The Pee Dee Indian tribe of South Carolina is recognized as an authentic American Indian tribe by the state of South Carolina. We were recognized as of January 27 of 2006.

JC: [00.01.26.000] But the Pee Dee Indian tribe has been in this area for many, many years—over 12,000 years. We were here in the Pee Dee Valley when the first settlers came in this area back in 1730.

JC: [00.01.41.000] At first, when the first settlers came in back in 1730, the Pee Dees worked with them and they helped them to colonize this area here. At the current time, there is over 2,000 members in this tribe.

JC: [00.01.56.000] And they’re scattered out over about five different counties—Marlboro County, Dillon County, Chesterfield County, Marion County, Florence County, and Darlington County.

JC: [00.02.08.000] And under the name of Pee Dee Indian Tribe of South Carolina, we also have people as members of the tribes that’s in other counties outside of the ones I just named.

JC: [00.02.18.000] We also have members serving in the armed forces throughout the world—Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany, you name it. They’re there.

JC: [00.02.27.000] Myself, I was born and raised in this area. I was born on December 24, 1939. I thank the Creator for these many years that I’ve had.

JC: [00.02.38.000] When I celebrate my seventy-fourth birthday coming up here pretty soon in December, I’ll praise Creator again because I’m still able to get up and go. I served twenty-four years and eight months in the United States Army.

JC: [00.02.51.000] I went from a grade of Private E1 to First Sergeant E8. I retired in 1985. During that twenty-four year career, I served over thirteen years in Germany. I served two tours in Vietnam, and I served in numerous assignments in the United States, including a three year tour as an ROTC instructor at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida.

JC: [00.03.15.000] So for a high school—correction, for a grade school dropout in the fourth grade, I think I’m doing pretty good, with the blessings on the Creator.

JC: [00.03.15.000] At the present time, as Chief of this tribe, I am striving very hard to bring us back from almost total annihilation.

JC: [00.03.31.000] Because when I got involved with the Tribe back in 2001, 2001-2002, the Tribe had pretty well fell apart. With a lot of hard work, a lot of help, and a lot of prayers, we’re on our way back.

JC: [00.03.46.000] I’m doing this interview today at our Pow Wow, which is our fifth anniversary gathering of our Pow Wow Native American festival. This is the fifth one that we’ve had since state recognition and this is turning out to be the biggest one we’ve had so far.

JC: [00.04.00.000] I appreciate all the help that people has given us. I appreciate all the time that’s been donated. And I look forward to working with each and every one. And I’d also like to thank the University of South Carolina at Lancaster for everything they’re doing by creating the Native American Indian Studies.

JC: [00.04.16.000] That’s been wonderful. Even when I’m gone across the river, you’ll still be able to go up there and find out things about the Native Americans, including the Pee Dees of South Carolina.

CJ [00.04.30.000] Chief, you told me once about going to the DMV to get a driver’s license. Tell me that story.

JC: [00.04.30.000] The story—In 1958 I had just turned eighteen years old.

JC: [00.04.43.000] Didn’t have any car, but I had a friend that had a car, and I wanted a driver’s license. So we went to Florence, South Carolina to apply for a driver’s license. I filled out the paperwork, turned it in.

JC: [00.04.58.000] And the lady at the counter, in a very nasal voice, she said, ‘You filled this out wrong.’ Now you gotta remember, I had dropped out of school in the fourth grade, so I knew I was smart. I had a good education.

JC: [00.05.14.000] She said again, she said, ‘Well you filled this out wrong.’ I said, ‘What? I filled the name out and everything.’ She said, ‘There ain’t no Indians in South Carolina.’ I said ‘What do you mean there ain’t no Indians in South Carolina?’ She said, ‘There ain’t no Indians in South Carolina. You ain’t Indian.’

JC: [00.05.31.000] I said, ‘Lady, I’m Indian.’ That was the only time in my entire life that I could have been any of four races—I could have been Black, I could have been Mexican, I could have been White, or I could have been other. I said, ‘I’m not White, I’m not Black, I’m not Mexican, and I don’t know what others is.’

JC: [00.05.54.000] She said, ‘Well you’ve got to choose one of them.’ I said, ‘Go ahead and put White on there,’ so she put White on the driver’s license. Less than three months later the highway patrol stopped me.

JC: [00.06.07.000] He’s dead now, a guy by the name of Tucker. He’s dead now, and he wanted to see the driver’s license, so I hand him my driver’s license. He looked at it, backed away from the car, come back and looked again, and said, ‘Are you White?’ I said, ‘That’s what it says, that’s what it says. ’

JC: [00.06.23.000] So, actually, we got recognition in 2006. Some reporter, I can’t remember who or what, but they made a comment in the paper—about an Indian in South Carolina couldn’t get his driver’s license. If that lady was still living, how would she feel to see it was the Chief of a Tribe?

CJ: [00.06.45.000] We were at the unity Pow Wow in Columbia. My son found a snake skin. You told a story about how humans no longer lose their skin. Tell me about that—I can’t remember.

JC: [00.07.00.000] Well now—humans are just like a snake when it comes to shedding your skin.

JC: [00.07.10.000] Snakes shed their skin every year and when they shed their skin its part of a tradition—like a rattlesnake they’ll shed it and add another—actually, why they shed it I don’t really know.

JC: [00.07.27.000] But the thing is, I say it’s similar to man, who sheds his skin. Man will shed his skin any time that he’s put into a situation where he needs to shed his skin.

JC: [00.07.39.000] So if I am in New York City and I’m an Indian and I identify as an Indian, but there’s something over here that I need or want but I can’t be Indian, I’ll shed that Indian skin and try to pick up that other skin.

JC: [00.07.57.000] So it’s constantly shifting. Now let me tell you about the Indian crabs. You know about the Indian crabs?

CJ: [00.07.57.000] No, never heard that one.

JC: [00.07.57.000] This is a great one. You’ve heard the old saying that the Indians are hard to get along with—and the Indians that won’t work together.

JC: [00.08.11.000] Well many years ago, there was an Indian down on the beach and he was crabbing, picking up crabs. And he had a bucket. And he would take and he’d put the crabs in the bucket.

JC: [00.08.23.000] A white guy came along and said, ‘You better put a lid on that bucket. Those crabs are going to come out.’ The Indian said, ‘They no come out.’ ‘What do you mean?’

JC: [00.08.34.000] He says, ‘They’re Indian crabs.’ ‘What do you mean Indian crabs?’ He said, ‘You watch them.’ Every time a crab get almost to the top and start to go over, one of the other crabs grab a hold on the leg and pull it back down.

JC: [00.08.46.000] He said, ‘This is what happens when the Indian, when he’s trying to achieve, because every time he gets up there, there’s always something to pull him back down.’

JC: [00.08.57.000] But education, that’s something that is very sacred to me is education. They key for survival for my people has been and will be education.

JC: [00.09.08.000] If you don’t have the education to know where you came from, how are you going to know where you’re going? And in this day and age, our culture is being left behind.

JC: [00.09.20.000] To old dinosaurs like myself, and a lot of other ones out here, we’re the ones that have that task of trying to hang onto that culture.

JC: [00.09.30.000] And a Pow Wow that we’re having today, we’ve got tribes—this is a mixture of tribes. We’ve got Tuscarora here, we’ve got Lumbee here, we’ve got Pee Dee here, we’ve got Beaver Creek here, we’ve got Wassamasaw, we’ve got Sumter Band of Cheraws here, we’ve got the Waccamaw here. We’ve got it together.

JC: [00.09.47.000] Now, we can work here today, but what we need first is we need to be educated about each other’s culture and then we can work together and move on.

CJ: [00.10.05.000] What’s your greatest hope for your people? If you could change one thing for the future and the kids that are here today, what would that be?

JC: [00.10.15.000] If I could change one thing, if I had the power to change one thing dealing with the young people—and when I say young people I speak from probably about the age of seven to eighteen because once you’re passed eighteen, you’re grown.

JC: [00.10.30.000] If I could do one thing, I would establish a way that those kids would always have everything they needed to be in school, go to school, nothing to stop them, not having to worry about the family and all.

JC: [00.10.50.000] Just get a straight, good education. And a way to guarantee them that if they stayed in school that they would have a college scholarship waiting when they graduate.

JC: [00.11.00.000] That’s the one thing that I want to try to work with the state of South Carolina on. You know, we talk about eagle feathers, we talk about bird skin, we talk about all this other stuff. None of that stuff fills the stomach, none of it fills the brain, and none of it puts a roof over your head.

JC: [00.11.16.000] I have three goals and I would love to see something happen. That’s medical for my people, housing for my people, education for my people.

JC: [00.11.28.000] And now for housing for my people, we have a rural housing development program. But there’s not a lot of Indian people out there that has $5,000 that they can put out to cover up all the costs to get into the home.

JC: [00.11.42.000] If I can get them into the home, they can make the payment on the home. So I want to try to work through the senators and the legislators with the state of South Carolina to try to come up with some way or another so we’ve got a program to help these Indian people get into the house.

CJ: [00.11.59.000] Are y’all working on federal recognition? Would that be a way to get some of these things?

JC: [00.11.59.000] We applied for federal recognition it’s been almost twenty years ago – 1998.

JC: [00.12.12.000] I got a letter two weeks ago, two or three weeks ago, saying they’ve changed the criteria now. Our petition is number 152 and it has been reviewed. They sent a letter showing all the things wrong, and that’s when I came back on board.

JC: [00.12.30.000] We worked on it, we made a few changes to it, but it takes money to pursue it. And we don’t have that money. And right now, I’m still working on it, but it’s not one of my number one priorities.

JC: [00.12.44.000] If I could take care of these other things then that could become a priority. If we was to become state recognized, I mean federally recognized, it would mean some housing, more housing.

JC: [00.12.57.000] The Lumbees are not federally recognized, but they’ve got all kinds of housing assistance. The tribe is eligible for the same assistance. I’ve just got to work with HUD to get it.

JC: [00.13.10.000] And I need people to help me do that. That’s where the education comes in again.

CJ: [00.13.10.000] So you need facilitators, people to work on these projects, opportunities for medical, housing, things like that.

JC: [00:13:21.000] [nods yes]

CJ: [00.13.27.000] Thank you James. I appreciate it. Thanks for the invitation to come over to talk to you.

JC: [00.13.27.000] Thank you, thank you for coming.