

## The Identity of Red Thunder Cloud

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Dr. Ives Goddard (left) interviews Red Thunder Cloud about his writings and Indian medicines on display at the Historic South Main Street Harvest Festival and Crafts Fair, Providence, R.I., October, 1981. (Photo by Moses Goddard)

Red Thunder Cloud, whose death on January 8, 1996, was widely noted as also being the death of the Catawba language, was one of the most colorful and enigmatic figures in American Indian linguistics in the twentieth century. His claim that he was a Catawba and a native speaker of the language, doubted by some and defended by others, can now be definitively evaluated. But while enough information is now available to give a good picture of who he was and where he came from, his life and his work still raise challenging and fascinating questions.

Red Thunder Cloud introduced himself to Frank G. Speck, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, in a letter of May 14, 1938. He states that he is "a 16 year old Catawba Indian and a Junior at Southampton High School" on Long Island.<sup>1</sup> He guesses that he was a "little fellow" when Speck visited the Catawbas (whose reservation was in Rock Hill, South Carolina), but says that "as a very young boy I was brought up among the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island. I have only been living with the Shinnecocks since July 27, 1937." He says that he has studied American Indians

since he was in the fourth grade and has visited many eastern groups, including several in Virginia, "though I was a tot when I visited some of them." He reports plans to leave in August "for my home down on the Catawba Reservation" in South Carolina, and then to travel to Haskell Indian Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. He mentions the interest of Shinnecock Indians on Long Island in learning about their language and his desire to help them in this, referring to a letter from Speck to a Shinnecock named Running Eagle replying to inquiries on this subject. He says that he intends to obtain a copy of Gatschet's Catawba sketch and inquires about the price of a "vocabulary" that he understands Speck has published.<sup>2</sup> "Fortunately for us the Catawbas our language is not entirely lost. Besides the lady you mentioned in your letter [*sc.* to Running Eagle] I think that there are two others of our tribe who still speak the language down to Catawba." He makes no claim that he knows any Catawba and does not refer to any member of his family. He signs himself "Chief Red Thunder Cloud."

When Frank T. Siebert, Jr., was doing fieldwork on Catawba in April, 1941, a local schoolteacher told him of receiving correspondence from Red Thunder Cloud, who claimed to know the language. A month later Siebert met him at the Gramercy Boys' Club in New York. Siebert often recalled his surprise on being approached by what appeared to be a young black man wrapped Indian-style in a blanket. In two or three hours of elicitation he obtained a couple of dozen Catawba words and somewhat fewer numbers, covering slightly more than three pages of a small exam book. His recollection years later was that Red Thunder Cloud knew considerably more than this, "between 100 and 250 words, ... numeral count up to ten, and occasional short expressions." Red Thunder Cloud also told him two traditions, one of tying buffalo hoofs to the feet to lure

enemies into an ambush, and one of using rattlesnake venom on pine needles as booby traps. He said he had learned Catawba from his grandmother, Ada McMechen (Blue Moccasin), who had died about 1924. Siebert thought that he might have remembered some Catawba from his grandmother but had supplemented his recollections from published materials. He considered a Catawba-speaking black grandmother possible, since Sally Brown Gordon had reported once meeting in a market in Charlotte, North Carolina, a black woman who spoke good Catawba. But Siebert recognized the two war practices Red Thunder Cloud described as the same ones attributed to the Catawbas of the 1750's in James Smith's captivity narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 1938, Red Thunder Cloud worked for Speck on small projects collecting ethnographic data and folklore among Long Island Indians, and he received from him some training in "field methods of recording notes etc." He also collected among the Montauk, Shinnecock, and Mashpee for George G. Heye (Museum of the American Indian) and for the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>4</sup> During this period he also published several papers on Long Island ethnography and folklore, and he amassed a large collection of photographs of Long Island Indians.<sup>5</sup> In December, 1943, he spent two weeks at Penn "furnishing information about the ... language of the Catawba tribe," recording songs, and aiding in ethnobotanical research. A statement that he "assisted Speck in informant courses" at Penn implies additional informant work, which a vita he prepared in 1973 refers to as "dictat[ing] ... Catawba Texts to Anthropology Classes," but Speck seems never to have published any linguistic data from him.<sup>6</sup> Also in 1943, he told Speck the tradition regarding the use of rattlesnake venom, crediting it to his grandmother Ada McMechen, who had "learned it from her grandmother, Mildred Harris, a woman who died sometime before 1900 at the age of 99. Both women were of Catawba descent."<sup>7</sup>

With a letter of introduction from Speck, Red Thunder Cloud made his first visit to the Catawbas, for about two weeks, in February, 1944. Later, most likely in 1945, he spent about six months studying the language intensively with Sam Blue and Sally Gordon, as recalled by Sam Blue's grandson, Chief Gilbert Blue. In defending Red Thunder Cloud's reliability as a fieldworker in 1946, Speck stated that "he speaks Catawba, as we know for a certainty."<sup>8</sup> When interviewed in 1957 by William C. Sturtevant (then of the Bureau of American Ethnology and now of the Dept. of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution), Sam Blue and his daughter-in-law Lillian said that they doubted Red Thunder Cloud was an Indian. Sam Blue thought that he had learned the few words of Catawba that he knew from Speck's books. In a letter to Speck written after his return, Red Thunder Cloud defended himself against this suspicion.<sup>9</sup>

Red Thunder Cloud introduced himself to Sturtevant in a 1958 letter offering aid in contacting eastern Indian groups and survivors, including three speakers of Wampanoag: "My mother is a Catawba Indian and my father a native of Tegucigalpa, Honduras of Honduran and Puerto Rican parentage. I speak Catawba, Spanish and Pourtegeese and am able to find myself in Cayuga, Seneca, Mohawk, Narragansett, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Creek and have some smattering of Choctaw, Sioux, Winnebago in addition to being able to recognize some of the other Indian languages when I hear them spoken."<sup>10</sup>

In 1964 and 1965 Red Thunder Cloud worked with G. Hubert Matthews, then at MIT, to document the Catawba language. Their 1967 publication of five texts (two dated to February, 1944) included information on Red Thunder Cloud's family history and a genealogy that indicates which relatives (all on his mother's side) were Catawbas and which of these spoke Catawba. His full name is given as Carlos Ashibie Hawk Westez. His father is Carlos Panchito Westez, and his mother is Roberta Hawk. His father's parents are Teodoro Sanchez (from Honduras) and Feliciano Mendoza (from Puerto Rico), and his mother's parents are William Ashibie Hawk (a Catawba speaker, son of Robert Hawk and Susan Scott Cobbs) and Ada McMechen (not a speaker, daughter of

George McMechen and Mildred Harris). Earlier generations on his mother's side are also given. In defending the authenticity of Red Thunder Cloud's Catawba to C.F. Voegelin, the editor of the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Matthews referred to the genealogy as one that Sam Blue and Red Thunder Cloud "were able to work out" and which "linked him with Catawba that Chief Blue knew." Red Thunder Cloud specifically claimed that he had learned Catawba from his mother's father, also called Strong Eagle, a lawyer who graduated from Yale Law School and died in 1941. He gave his mother's Indian name as Singing Dove.<sup>11</sup>

Red Thunder Cloud was frequently mentioned in local media. He once sued the town of Southampton for \$100,000 for "damages to the cultural development of Catawba Indian language" after the town dog warden destroyed nine of his dogs, which he had taught Catawba commands. Some of his activities, with further references, are described in the obituary and the note on media reports by Victor Golla in *SSILA Newsletter* 15.1:2, 4-5 (1996). He was a familiar figure at local fairs in New England, selling a line of herbal medicines under the name "Red Thunder Cloud's Accabonac Princess American Indian Teas" ("fresh from the American forest to you"). He also reported that he had "rescued some Montauk vocabulary from oblivion," and sometimes claimed to speak Montauk.<sup>12</sup> He was married for a time to Jean Marilyn Miller (Pretty Pony), said to be a Blackfeet, who appeared with him at powwows and other presentations.

On his death certificate, based on information provided by his friend Leonor Peña of Central Falls, R.I., his name is given as Carlos Westez (with aliases Red Thunder Cloud and Namo S. Hatirire) and his occupation as "Shaman." He is described as having been born in Newport, R.I., May 30, 1919, the son of Cromwell West and Roberta (Hawk) West. In the subsequent probate documents, his sister, a retired member of the faculty of the University of Maryland at Baltimore, appears as administrator, and his name is given as Ashbie Hawkins West, the name under which he had been enrolled in high school (with a recorded birth date of May 30, 1922) in the year he wrote to Speck and by which he was first known to the Shinnecocks.<sup>13</sup> In fact, his full name at birth was Cromwell Ashbie Hawkins West. He was enumerated as Cromwell A. West in the 1920 census and used the name Cromwell West when he was employed at the Newport City Wharf, 1935-1937, as a watchman and later a chauffeur. His father was Cromwell Payne West, a drugstore proprietor in Newport 1917-1937, who is listed in the 1900 and 1920 censuses as a black man born in Pennsylvania in 1891. By 1894 his father's father, Theodore D. West (born in Virginia), and his father's mother, Elizabeth R. West (born in Pennsylvania), had moved with his father to Newport, where his grandfather worked as a barber (or "hairdresser").<sup>14</sup> From about 1929 to 1933 Roberta West was not listed as being in Newport, and Leonor Peña believes that during this time she lived with her children in North Carolina, near the Catawba Reservation.<sup>15</sup>

The name Carlos Ashbie Hawk Westez is a transparent modification of the name Cromwell Ashbie Hawkins West, given that the father's name in the 1967 genealogy is Carlos Panchito Westez instead of Cromwell Payne West. If everywhere in this genealogy Ashbie is changed to Ashbie, Hawk to Hawkins, and Westez to West, it becomes on the mother's side the genealogy of Roberta West, who was born Roberta M. Hawkins in Baltimore in 1891. (She also used the names Roberta M.B. West and Roberta C. West.) Roberta Hawkins' father was William Ashbie Hawkins (1862-1941; LL.B. Howard Law School, 1892), one of the first black lawyers in Baltimore and a prominent civic leader, born the son of the Rev. Robert Hawkins and Susan (Cobb) Hawkins in Lynchburg, Va. Her mother was born Ada M. McMechen (*/mækméɛn/*), the daughter of George H. and Mildred McMechen of Wheeling, W. Va. George H. McMechen's occupation is given as "plasterer" and "mechanic." Ada McMechen Hawkins' younger brother, George William Frederick McMechen (1871-1961; B.A. Morgan College, 1895; LL.B. Yale Law School, 1897), Ashbie Hawkins' law partner, was another prominent member of Baltimore's black community; the business and economics building at Morgan State University in Baltimore is named for him.<sup>16</sup>

Red Thunder Cloud also mentioned that he had a cousin Gerald Brown (Running Beaver; d. 1952) who spoke Catawba, the son of his mother's sister, Hazel Hawk, and William Brown. Roberta West had a sister Aldina Haynes (d. 1940), who briefly lived in Newport under the name Aldina H. Brown in the 1930's, but W. Ashbie Hawkins' 1941 obituary mentions only two grandchildren, who were presumably Red Thunder Cloud and his sister.<sup>17</sup>

Cromwell Ashbie Hawkins West's life as Red Thunder Cloud confronts us with basic questions of race and identity that are emblematic of our age.<sup>18</sup> His successful life-long masquerade puts him in a class with the Englishman who was the Ojibway Grey Owl (1886-1936) and the African American who was the Blackfoot Buffalo Child Long Lance (d. 1932), both the subjects of films. But Red Thunder Cloud's accomplishment in becoming a speaker of Catawba puts him outside the class of ordinary impostors, and the not insignificant work he did on Catawba leaves us as linguists with challenging problems of interpretation and evaluation.

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Letter, Red Thunder Cloud to F.G. Speck, May 14, 1938, American Philosophical Society.

<sup>2</sup> A.S. Gatschet, "Grammatic Sketch of the Catawba Language," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 2:527-49 (1900); F.G. Speck, *Catawba Texts*, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, F.T. Siebert to I. Goddard, October 6, 1965; Siebert papers, APS; Jon Marcus (Associated Press), "Did Language Die with 'Last Catawba'; Death Leaves Questions No Tongue Can Answer," *Seattle Times*, March 31, 1996, p. A8; *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Col. James Smith* (2nd. ed., Cincinnati, 1870), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Red Thunder Cloud to W.C. Sturtevant, October 25, 1958; Edmund S. Carpenter, p.c.

<sup>5</sup> "Surviving Folktales and Herbal Lore Among the Shinnecock Indians of Long Island," *Journal of American Folklore* 58, 1945; "A Study of the Long Island Indian Problem," *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society* 5(2):17-19, 1944; "An Ethnological Introduction to the Long Island Indians," *BMAS* 6(3):39-42, 1945; "A Selection of Montaukett Indian Photographs: Red Thunder Cloud Collection," *The History and Archaeology of the Montauk Indians*, Suffolk County Archaeological Association (Lexington, Mass., 1979), pp. 203-218.

<sup>6</sup> "What's Good for Tummyache, Heap Big Chief?" *Philadelphia Bulletin*, December 27, 1943; *Pennsylvania Gazette* 42(5):10, 1944; G. Hubert Matthews and Red Thunder Cloud, "Catawba Texts," *IJAL* 33(1):7-24, 1967; Red Thunder Cloud's vita prepared for

History Department, Long Island University, Southampton, N.Y.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund S. Carpenter and Royal B. Hassrick, "Some Notes on Arrow Poisoning Among the Tribes of the Eastern Woodlands," *Proceedings of the Delaware County Institute of Science*, 10(2):45-52, 1947, esp. pp. 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, Red Thunder Cloud to F.G. Speck, March 7, 1944, APS; letter, G.H. Matthews to C.F. Voegelin, April 12, 1966; David Perlmutter, "Catawba Language Lives Despite Thunder Cloud's Death," *Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1996, p. 1C; Chief Gilbert Blue, p.c.; *BMAS* 7(3):62, April 1946.

<sup>9</sup> W.C. Sturtevant fieldnotes, interviews with Sam Blue and Lillian Blue, July 30 and 31, 1957.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, Red Thunder Cloud to W.C. Sturtevant, October 25, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> "Indian Aids Linguist in Catawba Studies," *New York Times*, February 28, 1965; Matthews and Red Thunder Cloud, p. 7; letter, G.H. Matthews to C.F. Voegelin, April 12, 1966; "Field Chief Red Thunder Cloud," *The East Hampton Star*, March 25, 1971; Moses Goddard, slides taken October, 1981, Providence, R.I.

<sup>12</sup> Bob Wacker, "Indian Wants Town to Pay for Slain Dogs," *Newsday*, September 28, 1979; Phyllis Funke, "Indian Culture at L.I. Outpost," *New York Times*, August 26, 1973; M. Goddard, slides; Barbara Graymont, p.c.

<sup>13</sup> Worcester County, Mass., Probate Court; Worcester Vital Records Office; Faculty records, University of Maryland at Baltimore; Southampton High School student records; letter, John Strong to W.C. Sturtevant, November 23, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Division of Vital Records, Rhode Island Department of Health; *Newport Directory*, 1899-1901, 1917-1937; Twelfth Census of the U.S., 1900; Fourteenth Census of the U.S., 1920. (When contacted, Red Thunder Cloud's sister declined to be interviewed about herself or brother, and none of the information in this note was obtained from her.)

<sup>15</sup> Leonor Peña, p.c.

<sup>16</sup> *Who's Who of the Colored Race* 1:132-33, 1915; "Ashbie Hawkins, Attorney for 50 Years, Dies at 78," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 12, 1941; "Rites Set For McMechen, First Graduate of Morgan," *Baltimore Sun*, February 25, 1961; "George McMechen dies, rites held last Sunday," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 4, 1961; Tenth Census of the U.S., 1880; Roger W. Tuttle, ed., *Biographies of Graduates of the Yale Law School, 1824-1899* (New Haven, 1911); "The Road from Frederick to Thurgood," on-line research project of the Maryland State Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews and Red Thunder Cloud, pp. 7-8; *Newport Directory*, 1933-1934; n.16.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., U.S. Census 2000, questions 7 and 8.

