

# Old Catawba

By Thomas Wolfe

On the middle-Atlantic seaboard of the North American continent and at about a day's journey from New York, is situated the American state of Old Catawba. In area and population the state might almost strike a median among the states of the union: its territory, which is slightly more than fifty thousand square miles, is somewhat larger than the territories of most of the Atlantic coastal states, and, of course, much smaller than the great areas of the immense but sparsely populated states of the Far West. Upon this area, which is a little smaller than the combined areas of England and Wales, there live about three million people, of whom about the third part are black. Catawba, therefore, is about as big as England, and has about as many people as Norway.

The state possesses, however, a racial type and character that is probably much more strongly marked and unified than that of any European country. In fact, although America is supposed by many of her critics to be a confusion of races, tongues, and peoples, as yet unwelded, there is perhaps nowhere in the world a more homogeneous population than that of Old Catawba. Certainly, there are far greater differences in stature, temperament, speech, and habit, between a North German and a South German, a North Frenchman and a Southern Frenchman, a North of England man and a Devon man, a North Italian and a South Italian, than between a Catawban from the East and one from the West.

The name "Catawba" is, of course, an Indian name: it is the name of a tribe that is now almost extinct but which at one time flourished in considerable strength and number. The chief seat of the tribe was in South Carolina, and there is at the present time a reservation in York County of that state where the remnant is gathered together.

The way in which the State of Catawba got its name rests entirely upon misconception: the tribes that the early explorers encountered were not Catawbans, they belonged probably to a tribe that is now wholly extinct. Yet, so strong is the power of usage and association that any other name would now seem unthinkable to a native of that state. People outside the state have often said that the name has a somewhat tropical laziness in its sound, particularly when prefixed with the word "old," but there is very little that is tropical or exotic either in the appearance and character of Catawba itself, or of the people who inhabit it. To them, the name Catawba perfectly describes the state: it has the strong, rugged, and homely quality that the earth has.

In the state documents during the period of the royal proprietors, the territory is invariably referred to as "Catawba," or "His Majesty's Colony in the Catawbans"; the name "Old Catawba" does not begin to appear in state papers until twenty or thirty years before the Revolution, and for what reason no one knows. The typical American method in naming places has been to prefix the word "new" to the name—New England, New York, New Mexico—to distinguish these places from their older

namesakes. But if New York indicates the existence somewhere of an old York, old Catawba does not indicate the existence of a new one. The name undoubtedly grew out of the spirit of the people who had dwelt there over a century, and the name did not come from a sentimental affection, it grew imperatively from a conviction of the spirit. It is one of those names that all men begin to use at about the same time, a perfect and inevitable name that has flowered secretly within them, and that now must be spoken.

Anyone who has ever lived in the state for any length of time is bound to feel this: the word "old" is not a term of maudlin affection, it describes exactly the feeling that the earth of that state inspires—the land has a brooding presence that is immensely old and masculine, its spirit is rugged and rather desolate, yet it broods over its people with stern benevolence. The earth is a woman, but Old Catawba is a man. The earth is our mother and our nurse, and we can know her, but Old Catawba is our father, and although we know that he is there, we shall never find him. He is there in the wilderness, and his brows are bowed with granite: he sees our lives and deaths and his stern compassion broods above us. Women love him, but only men can know him: only men who have cried out in their agony and their loneliness to their father, only men who have sought throughout the world to find him, can know Catawba: but this is all the men who ever lived.

The Catawba people are great people for all manner of debate and reasoned argument. Where the more fiery South Carolinian or Mississippian will fly into a rage and want to fight the man who doubts his word or questions his opinion, the eye of the Catawban begins to glow with a fire of another sort—the lust for debate, a Scotch love of argument. Nothing pleases a Catawban better than this kind of dispute. He will say persuasively, "Now let's see if we can't see through this thing. Let's see if we can't git to the bottom of this." A long, earnest, and even passionate discussion will ensue in which the parties on both sides usually maintain the utmost good temper, kindness, and tolerance, but in which they nevertheless pursue their arguments with great warmth and stubbornness. In these discussions several interesting traits of the Catawban quickly become manifest: the man is naturally a philosopher—he loves nothing better than to discuss abstract and difficult questions such as the nature of truth, goodness, and beauty, the essence of property, the problem of God. Moreover, in the development of his arguments the man loves the use of homely phrases and illustration, he is full of pungent metaphors drawn from his experience and environment; and in discussing an ethical question—say, the "moral right" of a man to his property, and to what extent he may profit by it—the Catawban may express himself somewhat in this manner:

"Well, now, Joe, take a case of this sort: suppose I buy a mule from a feller over there on the place next to mine, an' suppose I pay a hundred and fifty dollars fer that mule."

"Is this a one-eyed mule or a two-eyed mule you're buy-in'?" Joe demands with a broad wink around at his listening audience.

"It's a two-eyed mule," the first man says good-humor-edly, "but if you've got any objections to a two-eyed mule, we'll make it a one-eyed mule."

"Why, hell, no! Jim," the other man now says, "I ain't got no objections, but it seems to me if you're goin\* to have a two-eyed mule you ought to have something better than a one-eyed argyment."

There is a roar of immense male laughter at this retort, punctuated with hearty slappings of thigh and knee, and high whoops in the throat.

"By d-damn!" one of the appreciative listeners cries, when he can get his breath, "I reckon that'll hold 'im fer a while."

The story of the "two-eyed mule and the one-eyed argyment" is indeed an immense success, it is the kind of phrase and yarn these people love, and it is destined for an immediate and wide circulation all over the community, accompanied by roars and whoops of laughter. It may even be raised to the dignity of proverbial usage so that one will hear men saying, "Well, that's a two-eyed mule an' a one-eyed argyment if I ever saw one," and certainly the unfortunate Jim may expect to be greeted for some time to come in this way:

"Howdy, Jim. I hear you've gone into the mule business," or, "Hey, Jim, you ain't bought no two-eyed mules lately, have you?" or, "Say, Jim: you ain't seen a feller with a one-eyed argyment lookin' fer a two-eyed mule, have you?"

Jim knows very well that he is "in" for this kind of treatment, but he joins in the laughter good-humoredly, although his clay-red face burns with a deeper hue and he awaits the resumption of debate with a more dogged and determined air.

"Well, that's all right about that," he says, when he can make himself heard. "Whether he's a one-eyed mule or a two-eyed mule is neither here nor there."

"Maybe one eye is here, an' t'other there," someone suggests, and this sets them off again at Jim's expense. But Jim has the determination of the debater and the philosopher, and although his face is pretty red by now, he sticks to his job.

"All right," he says at length, "say I got a mule, anyway, an' he's a good mule, an' I paid one hundred and fifty dollars fer him. Now!" he says, pausing, and lifting one finger impressively. "I take that mule an' work him on my farm fer four years. He's a good mule an' a good worker an' durin' that time he pays fer himself twice over! Now!" he declares again, pausing and looking triumphantly at his opponent, Joe, before resuming his argument.

"All right! All right 1" Joe says patiently with an air of resignation. "I heard you. I'm still waitin'. You ain't said nothin' yet. You ain't proved nothin' yet."

"Now!" Jim continues slowly and triumphantly. "I gave one hundred and fifty dollars fer him but he's earned his keep an' paid fer himself twice over."

"I heard you! I heard you!" says Joe patiently.

"In other words," someone says, "you got back what you paid fer that mule with one hundred and fifty dollars to boot."

"Egs-actly!" Jim says with decision, to the group that is now listening intently. "I got back what I put into him an'

I got one hundred fifty dollars to boot. Now here comes another feller," he continues, pointing indefinitely towards the western horizon, "who needs a good mule, an' he sees my mule, an' he offers to buy it!" Here Jim pauses again, and he turns and surveys his audience with triumph written on his face.

"I heard you. I'mlistenin'," says Joe in a patient and monotonous voice.

"How much does he offer you?" someone asks.

"Now, wait a minute! I'm comin' to that," says Jim with a silencing gesture. "This here feller says, 'That's a perty good mule you got there! T reckon he'll do!' I say. T ain't got no complaint to make! T'm thinkin' of buyin' a mule myse'f,' he says. 'That so?' I say. 'Yes,' he says, T could use another mule on my farm. You ain't thinkin' of sellin' that mule there, are you?' 'No,' I say, T ain't thinkin' of it.' 'Well,' he says, 'would you consider an offer fer him?' 'Well,' I say, T might an' I might not. It all depends.' 'How much will you take fer him?' he says. 'Well,' I say, T ain't never thought of sellin' him before. I'd rather you'd make an offer. How much will you give?' 'Well,' he says, 'how about three hundred dollars?'"

There is a pause of living silence now while Jim turns finally and triumphantly upon his audience.

"Now!" he cries again, powerfully, and decisively, leaning forward with one big hand gripped upon his knee and his great index finger pointed toward them.

"I'm listenin'," Joe says in a calm but foreboding tone.

"I got my money back out o' that mule," Jim says, beginning a final recapitulation.

"Yes, an' you got another hundred an' fifty to boot," someone helpfully suggests.

"That makes one hundred per cent clear profit on my 'riginal investment," Jim says. "Now here comes a feller who's willin' to pay me three hundred dollars on top of that. That makes three hundred per cent."

He pauses now with a conclusive air.

"Well?" says Joe heavily. "Go on. I'm still waitin'. What's the argyment?"

"Why," says Jim, "the argyment is this: I got my money back—"

"We all know that," says Joe. "You got your money back an' hundred per cent to boot."

“Well,” says Jim, “the argyment is this: Have I any right to take the three hundred dollars that feller offers me?”

“Right?” says Joe, staring at him. “Why, what are you talkin’ about? Of course, you got the right. The mule’s yours, ain’t he?”

“An!” says Jim with a knowing look, “that’s just the point. Is he?”

“You said you bought an’ paid fer him, didn’t you?” someone said.

“Yes,” said Jim, “I did that, all right.”

“Why hell, Jim,” someone else says, “you just ain’t talkin’ sense. A man’s got the right to sell his own property.”

“The legal right,” Jim says, “The legal right! Yes! But I ain’t talkin’ about the legal right. I’m talkin’ about the mawral right.”

They gaze at Jim for a moment with an expression of slack-jawed stupefaction mixed with awe. Then he continues:

“A man’s got a right to buy a piece of property an’ to sell it an’ to git a fair profit on his investment. I ain’t denyin’ that. But has any man,” he continues, “a right—a mawral right—to a profit of three hundred per cent?”

Now Jim has made his point, he is content to rest for a moment and await the attack that comes, and comes immediately: after a moment’s silence there is a tumult of protest, derisive laughter, strong cries of denial, a confusion of many voices all shouting disagreement, above which Joe’s heavy baritone finally makes itself heard.

“Why, Jim!” he roars. “That’s the damndest logic I ever did hear. I did give you credit fer havin’ at least a oneeyed argyment, but I’m damned if this argyment you’re givin’ us has any eyes a-tall!”

Laughter here, and shouts of agreement.

“Why, Jim!” another one says with solemn humor, with an air of deep concern, “you want to go to see a doctor, son: you’ve begun to talk funny. Don’t you know that?”

“All right. All right!” says Jim doggedly. “You can laugh all you please, but there’s two sides to this here question, no matter what you think.”

“Why, Jim!” another one says, with a loose grin playing around his mouth. “What you goin’ to do with that two-eyed mule? You goin’ to give him away to that feller simply because you got your money out of him?”

“I ain’t sayin’!” says Jim stubbornly, looking very red in the face of their laughter. “I ain’t sayin’ what I’d do. Mebbe I would and mebbe I wouldn’t.”

There is a roar of laughter this time, and the chorus of derisive voices is more emphatic than ever. But for some moments now, while this clamor has been going on, one of the company has fallen silent, he has fallen into a deep study, into an attitude of earnest meditation. But now he rouses himself and looks around with an expression of commanding seriousness.

“Hold on a moment there, boys,” he says. “I’m not so sure about all this. I don’t know that Jim’s such a fool as you think he is. ‘Pears to me there may be something in what he says.”

“Now!” says Joe, with an air of finality. “What did I tell you! The woods are full of ‘em. Here’s another ‘un that ain’t all there.”

But the contest is now just beginning in earnest: it goes on furiously, but very seriously, from now on, with these two Horatiuses holding their bridge valiantly and gaining in strength and conviction at each assault. It is a remarkable circumstance that at almost every gathering of Cataw-bans there is one or more of these minority warriors who become more thoughtful and dubious as their companions grow more vociferous in their agreement and derision, and who, finally, from a first mild expression of doubt, become hotly embattled on the weaker side, and grow in courage and conviction at every breath, every word they utter, every attack they make or repel.

And it has always been the same with the Catawba people. Their character has strong Scotch markings: they are cautious and deliberate, slow to make a radical decision. They are great talkers, and believe in prayer and argument. They want to “reason a thing out,” they want to “git to the bottom of a thing” through discussion, they want to settle a thing peaceably by the use of diplomacy and compromise. They are perhaps the most immensely conservative people on earth, they reverence authority, tradition, and leadership, but when committed to any decision, they stick to it implacably, and if the decision is war, they will fight to the end with the fury of maniacs.

Until very recent years these people were touched scarcely at all by ‘foreign’ migration, whether from any of the other states, or from Europe: even today the number of ‘foreign-born’ citizens is almost negligible, the state has the largest percentage of native-born inhabitants in the country. This stock proceeds directly from the stock of the early settlers, who were English, German, and Scotch, particularly Scotch: the frequency with which Scotch names occur—the Grahams, the Alexanders, the McRaes, the Ramsays, the Morrisons, the Pettigrews, the Pentlands, etc.—is remarkable, as is also a marked Scottishness of physique, a lean, angular, big-boned and loose-jointed structure, a long loping stride, an immense vitality and endurance, especially among the mountaineers in the western part of the state. In fact, during the recent war, it was found by the Army examiners that Catawba furnished easily the tallest troops in the service, and that their average height was a good inch and a half above the average for the country. From this it must not be supposed, as some philological pedagogues have supposed, with the mincing and accurate inaccuracy which is usual in this kind of

people, that Old Catawba is today a magnificent anachronism populated with roistering and swashbuckling Elizabethans, “singing” (the pedagogues gloatingly remark of the mountaineers) “the very songs their ancestors sang in England four centuries ago, in a form that is practically intact,” or with warlike and mad-eyed Kelts, chanting the same ballads as when they stormed across the borders behind the Bruces.

No. The Catawban of today is not like this, nor would he want to be. He is not a colonist, a settler, a transplanted European; during his three centuries there in the wilderness, he has become native to the immense and lonely land that he inhabits, during those three centuries he has taken on the sinew and color of that earth, he has acquired a character, a tradition, and a history of his own: it is an obscure history, unknown to the world and not to be found in the pages of books, but it is a magnificent history, full of heroism, endurance, and the immortal silence of the earth. It lives in his heart, it lives in his brain, it lives in his unrecorded actions; and with this knowledge he is content, nor does he feel the need of ballads or Armadas to trick him into glory.

He does not need to speak, he does not need to affirm or deny, he does not need to assert his power or his achievement, for his heart is a lonely and secret heart, his spirit is immensely brave and humble, he has lived alone in the wilderness, he has heard the silence of the earth, he knows what he knows, and he has not spoken yet. We see him, silent and unheralded, in the brief glare of recorded event—he is there in the ranks of the American Revolution, and eighty years later he is there, gloriously but silently, in the ranks of the Civil War. But his real history is much longer and much more extraordinary than could be indicated by these flares of war: it is a history that goes back three centuries into primitive America, a strange and unfathomable history that is touched by something dark and supernatural, and that goes back through poverty, and hardship, through solitude and loneliness and death and unspeakable courage, into the wilderness. For it is the wilderness that is the mother of that nation, it was in the wilderness that the strange and lonely people who have not yet spoken, but who inhabit that immense and terrible land from East to West, first knew themselves, it was in the living wilderness that they faced one another at ten paces and shot one another down, and it is in the wilderness that they still live, waiting until the unspeakable thing in them shall be spoken, until they can unlock their hearts and wreak out the dark burden of their spirit—the legend of loneliness, of exile, and eternal wandering that is in them.

The real history of Old Catawba is not essentially a history of wars or rebellions; it is not a history of politics or corrupt officials; it is not a history of democracy or plutocracy or any form of government; it is not a history of business men, puritans, knaves, fools, saints, or heroes; it is not a history of culture or barbarism.

The real history of Old Catawba is a history of solitude, of the wilderness, and of the immense and eternal earth, it is the history of millions of men living and dying alone in the wilderness, it is the history of the billion unrecorded and forgotten acts and moments of their lives; it is a history of the sun and the moon and the earth, of the sea that with lapse and reluctance of its breath, feathers eternally against the desolate coasts, and of

great trees that smash down in lone solitudes of the wilderness; it is a history of time, dark time, strange secret time, forever flowing like a river.

The history of Old Catawba is the history of millions of men living alone in the wilderness, it is the history of millions of men who have lived their brief lives in silence upon the everlasting earth, who have listened to the earth and known her million tongues, whose lives were given to the earth, whose bones and flesh are recompactd with the earth, the immense and terrible American earth that makes no answer.

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